Korriban Night of Ultimate Remembrance

"…*We are all counting on you to see this through*," the rumbling voice of Jedi Grandmaster Kol Skywalker, boomed through the speaker system of the Jedi Order *Tri-Scythe*-class frigate the *Sebatyne*. "*We have known for a while that this was inevitable. That the peace forged by the Solo family a century ago would not last forever. Some of you may see your friends in the battlefield, some even family. I remind you now of the oath you swore to this galaxy. You are a member of the Jedi Order, a soldier who has vowed to preserve the peace and keep balance between light and dark. Our goal is not to annihilate the Dark Council and its followers, for that would tip the galaxy back into light. What we must do is ensure that the Sith who wish to keep the Force balanced ascend once more. Nevertheless, in combat, show no mercy, for you will receive none. The Force will favor the bold, so set foot upon the field of battle and let it know your name."*
"Feeling all right, Sentinel Tahal?"
"Yes, ma'am, just a few nerves." The younger Jedi replied to his commander.
"We haven't made the jump to hyperspace yet. Try a few calming exercises while you can, Sentinel."
"Yes, Master Durron."
Mathias Tahal took off his helmet and ran a hand through his unruly dark hair, taking a deep breath as he did. At twenty-three years of age, he still had a hard time believing that the famed Jedi Master Ryva Durron had picked him for her command. The woman was a legend in her own right. Not only was she an heir of the Durron legacy, but if the stories were to be believed, she had single-handedly saved entire star-systems. She liked to play down her achievements, '*Same star system, thrice. It just had a habit of getting into trouble so I was more ready the next couple of times around.*' But at the same time it was kind of hard not to stare considering that she was also the head of the Order of Rhysode.
The Order of Rhysode. The faction of the Jedi Order dedicated to counter-intelligence and propaganda. Capable of toppling governments with a few well-placed whispers, with setting into motion a chain of events with results that might not be seen for several years. For those that found religion in the precepts of the Jedi Order, it was the Order of Rhysode that maintained the many temples throughout the galaxy to reinforce their piety. If the media had questions regarding the Jedi Order or their actions, it was a member of the Order of Rhysode who could be found on the HoloNet. They ferreted out unrest, got to the

heart of any dissatisfaction. But despite the secret-police-sounding tactics they utilized, they somehow remained universally loved and respected. *That* Order of Rhysode.
It had been a pipe-dream of Mathias' to join. A dream for many of the initiated. The Order of Rhysode was the Jedi Order's most public face and was all most of the public knew of the Jedi. But despite its public presence, only the 'best' got in. What that 'best' was was completely up to the Jedi Master in charge. Could be the Jedi best at lying, the best at fighting, the best at folding paper figures with hidden notes, at line-dancing. Every single member of the Order of Rhysode was 'best' at something, even if it wasn't at all obvious what that was or how it was immediately useful.
But Mathias had his own reasons for wanting to be in the order. Primarily, it was named after his great, great grandfather, Ganner Rhysode.

NUR I NUR

Palanhi, one-hundred and eleven years ago during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion

"Ganner! Ganner! Ganner!"
"Easy, easy!" Ganner laughed, then groaned again and clutched at his side.
Being bounced up and down and celebrated would normally be fun, but an inconsiderate Yuuzhan Vong warrior had stabbed him in the fighting, robbing Ganner's enjoyment of the festivities. At least he could enjoy the fireworks in the sky in the form of damaged Yuuzhan Vong ships burning apart in re-entry. The spaceport was saved for the moment, and the Yuuzhan Vong vanguard vanquished.
"Ms. Konat!" Ganner called out to the local HoloNet news reporter who had joined the fighting using her Holocam droid as a weapon. "How do you think I did?"
The Twi'lek reporter just laughed at him through tear-filled eyes. "Like you need me to boost your ego any more, Jedi Rhysode."
"It's 'Ganner,'" Ganner grinned he hoped was a winning smile and not agonizing grimace.
"Very well," Pal'iva's head-tails rippled as she managed to push through the crowd and grip one of his hands. "Ganner. Although, after today, you'll probably be called the Hero of Palanhi."
"Hero, huh?" Ganner let out a small snort of disbelief, shaking his head. The action, of course, had to aggravate his injury and sent a spike of fire through his nervous system. He somehow managed to force out his next words. "Who'd have thought?"
Pal'iva gasped. "Jedi Rhysode is hurt! Are there any doctors out here?"

Ganner and Pal'iva were fortunate that some of the civilians who had been hiding in the spaceport when the invasion began were indeed doctors.
"We need to get him out of those clothes to treat his wounds," one of the doctors said.
"On it," Pal'iva said determinedly.
Ganner couldn't help but laugh. "We haven't even had our first date yet and you can't wait to undress me, Ms. Konat."
Her blush was noticeable on her yellow skin. "I can't wait to do other things too, namely bash you over the head with my holocam droid."
"How is it, by the way?" Ganner slurred. He could already feel what was left of the amphistaff venom kicking in, giving him a small sense of vertigo. "Saw you using it to give a Vong a fatal concussion."
"Gave the Vong a new reason to hate droids," Pal'iva remarked, not liking the worried looks the doctors were exchanging. "Ganner?"
Ganner tried to reply, but his head felt heavy, as did his arms, his legs, and pretty much the rest of him. He decided to close his eyes and do his best to ignore the burning pain of the Yuuzhan Vong venom, slipping into a healing trance as best as he could. He did so not realizing that the trance dropped his pulse to almost non-existent levels.
"Damn it, Jedi Rhysode!"
Ganner's eyes snapped open at the stinging slap. He looked at Pal'iva a bit bewildered. "What was that for? I was trying to enter a healing trance."
"I…oh," Pal'iva stammered. "I thought you were dying."
"Slapping me is going to fix that?"
"If you were dying, it wasn't going to make it worse," Pal'iva replied in embarrassed sassiness.
"I'll be fine, Pal'iva," Ganner laughed weakly, then groaned and mentally reminded himself that he shouldn't be doing anything other than short, small breaths. "I'm Ganner Rhysode after all."

NUR I NUR

Ganner slowly woke slightly tangled up in lavish silken sheets, the dying sunlight filtering in through a towering window and splashing across the deep green four-posted bed. He shifted and felt bacta bandages swathing his bare chest, as well as a few more on his equally bare legs, and was reminded of just how badly he had been wounded in the fighting.
A quick check with the Force told him that his reporter friend was in the room with him. Her thoughts loud enough for him to hear as she gazed forlornly out the window, and he didn't particularly care for the

maudlin thoughts making laps in her mind. Deciding to do something to distract her, Ganner faked a loud groan and gave an exaggerated stretch.
"You're awake, good. You were lucky, they were talking about amputation," Pal'iva smiled a small, forced smile, turning away from the window.
Ganner paused, then his eyes widened at her words and he lifted up the sheets. He was more than a little relieved to see that he was still wearing underwear.
And that everything was accounted for.
"Your leg, you idiot," Pal'iva laughed genuinely, shaking her head in amusement.
"That's what I was checking," Ganner said defensively. "I couldn't exactly feel them so I wanted to be sure."
"You can't feel your legs?" Pal'iva's teasing tone fell away and was replaced with genuine concern as she quickly moved to his bedside. All of her previous, depressing thoughts were abandoned as she focused on him.
Ganner pulled the sheets aside and made a show of trying to lift one leg. "Not really."
Eyes wide, Pal'iva placed a hand on his shin. "You can feel my hand though, right?"
"A little," Ganner nodded, keeping his own face frozen in worry. Despite feeling like a total heel, he had at least distracted Pal'iva from the thoughts that had been plaguing her moments before. "But I feel it even less at the tops of your fingers."
"How about here?" Pal'iva placed her hand on his kneecap and looked up to him expectantly.
"Barely anything," Ganner shook his head mournfully.
"Maybe it has to do with the Yuuzhan Vong weapon that bit you," Pal'iva gently placed her hand over the bacta patch on his upper thigh, concern for his health momentarily overriding all other feelings. When she looked back to him to confirm her theory, however, she saw him looking at her with a raised eyebrow.
It was then she realized just where her hand was in relation to other parts of his anatomy. Pal'iva flushed once more and yanked her hand away like it had been burned. At Ganner's smirk, she grabbed a pillow from the bed and proceeded to beat Ganner with it. He made a show of trying to ward her off. "Hey! Seriously wounded here! A doctor isn't supposed to abuse her patients."
"I'm not a doctor," Pal'iva ended her assault by throwing her pillow at him. "And you're the one definitely abusing my patience."

"Told you I'd be okay," Ganner said with a cocky smile.
Pal'iva bowed her head and let out a breath. "You really are amazing, Ganner."
"Of course I am."
Pal'iva rolled her eyes. "And evidently not at all humble."
"Could you be humble if you're as amazing as I am?" Ganner pressed on.
He wasn't trying to be arrogant on purpose. Gifted with the Force, he could feel the myriad of emotions coming from the reporter. Relief, attraction, amusement, anger, confusion, disgust. The last two not directed at him in anyway, and he knew the source. She was a reporter, hadn't so much as killed a fly until the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong. But in the span of a single battle, she had bludgeoned at least two of the warriors to death with her holocam. Those visceral memories haunted her still.
She caught his crystal-clear blue eyes studying her, and she then *knew* that he had sensed what she was thinking about. She averted her gaze, hugging herself with a single arm.
"Hey, come here," Ganner gestured to the side of the overly large bed, feeling shame slowly win out over all her other emotions.
"No, it's okay. I don't want to bother y…." Pal'iva let out a small gasp as she suddenly found herself floating in the air. "Ganner, put me down!"
Ganner blinked then shrugged.
Realizing that she was already above the foot of the bed and that her words needed to be timed better, Pal'iva let out another squeal as she fell the few inches onto the very soft bed. She bounced unceremoniously on the mattress and glared up at the Jedi as she struggled to collect herself. "Ganner!"
"I did what you said," Ganner said innocently.
Pal'iva stared at him in disbelief for several long moments, then retreated to the far corner of the bed, tears forming in her eyes as she curled her arms around her legs. "I'm just a backwater HoloNet reporter. You're a Jedi Knight. Hero of Palanhi. Vanquisher of the bad guys. What's one reporter's silly worries to the galaxy-shaking things you're responsible for?"
"At the moment?" Ganner said, his voice gentle. "Everything."
Pal'iva's jerked her head up in shock, looking at him in disbelief. "You can't mean that. I mean, you've seen more of the war then most people on this planet will ever…"
"Everything," Ganner repeated, gently floating her the rest of the way to his side.

Pal'iva held his gaze with wide, watery eyes. "But…but…"
Ganner smiled tenderly as he cradled her face in his hands. "Galactic-threat solving, or personal-nightmare banishing, Jedi Knight Ganner Rhysode, at your service."
Several hours later, with the room's fireplace crackling merrily, two individuals were resting in the tangled silken sheets and laughing softly.
"It's too bad that people won't ever know *this* part of your legend, Ganner," Pal'iva grinned. "Impressive as it was."
"All better?" Ganner asked, lightly playing with one of her lekku.
"All better. It was either them or me, and they would have turned me into a slave or sacrificial offering to their gods," Pal'iva confirmed firmly. She placed a hand on him, and smirked. "By the way, you have a very convincing way of emphasizing your *point*."
"Isn't my impressive oral skills the reason why your bosses are going to promote you after all those interviews you did with me?" Ganner shot back.
"You definitely have a silver tongue," Pal'iva sighed contently, gazing at him fondly.
The fireplace crackled comfortably in the silence.
"You know, I've been meaning to ask. Who's place is this? Unless HoloNet journalists are paid a heck of a lot more than I thought, I'm guessing it isn't yours?"
"It could be."
"You have a platinum toilet in your bedroom's refresher?" Ganner gestured to the adjoining room.
"Okay fine," Pal'iva relented, her grin one of pure amusement. "This place belongs to a very good…"
"Very rich," Ganner supplied.
"Very good and rich, friend of mine," Pal'iva chuckled throatily. "In fact, she's just your type of girl."
"Dashing, witty, and a savior of all things big and small?"
"Single, ugly, without a brain-cell to rub together," Pal'iva said dryly.
"Hey, she's single, that works for me," Ganner laughed.
"Gamorrean," Pal'iva playfully dug her elbow into his side.
"Oink," Ganner retorted, rolling her so that she was on top of him.
"She's not actually from Palanhi. But she said she'd get here sometime today or tomorrow and gave the government permission to use her family's estate," Pal'iva explained, enjoying her new vantage point.
"Her father owns the Galactic Star and a couple other HoloNet channels. The Red Pulse on Teyr. The Nightline on Chandrila. Veri is not just rich, she's obscenely rich."

"Even better," Ganner heard a set of footsteps in the hallway with his Force-assisted hearing, and wondered if one of the servants in the house was checking up on them…again.
The wood-paneled door creaked open with care and a new voice whispered in hushed tones. "Pali, are you awake?"
Pal'iva's eyes bulged from their sockets and rolled off of Ganner, frantically trying to pull the sheets over her body. "It's her!"
Hearing the rustling, the door opened completely.
"Pal'iva, I…" A Mirialan woman in a gold and gem-embroidered dress entered, then froze in shock.
"Maveri!" Ganner's eyes mimicked Pal'iva's. He pulled the sheet high above his own body as well, recognizing Pal'iva's friend as someone from his own past. "Maveri Vixis?"
"Ganner!"
"Veri, you know him?" Pal'iva eked out, her head just visible beneath the luxury comforter.
"Apparently not as good as you," the dark-haired media heiress said dryly, her waist-length black hair swishing as she shook her head in exasperation.
"He was…errr…comforting me…"
"Uh huh," the young woman walked through the room, picking up the pieces of her friend's clothing from where they had been flung. "Wasn't he the one all the media channels were saying was 'fighting for his life after fighting for the people of Palanhj'?"
"I got better," Ganner grin widely in amazement. "Wow, Mav-Four, you look….wow."
"And you look like an army of extra-galactic aliens beat you to an inch of your life, and an overly ambitious HoloNet reporter took care of the rest." Maveri said it all with an amused smirk.
"'Mav-Four'?" Pal'iva asked, slipping out of the bed but keeping one of the sheets wrapped around her and meekly going over to her pile of clothing.
"Don't even," Maveri whipped around from where she had been opening one of the windows, and glowered. "Two words, Rooftop Dance."
Ganner's mouth slammed shut and he looked sheepishly at Pal'iva.
"Nickname I came up for her. I guess you call her Veri."
"You two *do* know each other," Pal'iva said in shock.
"Went to the same school before he got shipped off to Yavin," Maveri confirmed. "Showed off a lot."
"So he hasn't changed much then," Pal'iva laughed.

"At least not in that way," Maveri chuckled as well. "You know, I had the biggest crush on him at school. Especially after he levitated this girl who was picking on me into the swimming pool. We must have been ten, eleven years old? He got in a bucket load of trouble for that, but all he did was smile and wink at me while everyone yelled at him. I always felt guilty wondering if I was the reason he was sent to Yavin."
"He definitely is that knight-in-shining armor all those novels write about."
"I guess he's doing okay, health-wise?" Maveri continued on as if Ganner wasn't even present.
"I did a thorough check-up, no problems," Pal'iva blushed as she pulled her pants back on.
"Great, you wouldn't believe the look I had on my face when I saw *the* Ganner Rhysode giving an interview on my best-friend's channel. Of course, he had to be doing it in the middle of a war, so getting here was practically impossible. Had to bribe a couple of Peace Brigaders to let my ship through."
"The pain of having too much credits," Pal'iva said sarcastically.
"I know, right," Maveri matched her tone. She exhaled loudly. "Man, flying non-stop for two days straight is a pain. I'm beat."
"Ganner and I kind of made a mess of your bed. You can use the room your servants let me have," Pal'iva gestured, the last of her clothing pulled on.
"Is it your usual?" Maveri asked, pushing the door to the room open and letting the reporter out.
"Yeah, thanks for letting us crash here."
"Not a problem. Told you before, you're like a sister to me." Were the last words Ganner heard Maveri speak before the door closed behind them.
He blinked at the silence that followed, shuddering slightly as a cool breeze swept through the room through the opened windows. As his mind finally caught up to the whirlwind that had been one of his childhood classmates, he sagged back into the bed and grinned ruefully. The Force definitely moved in mysterious ways.

NUR II NUR

Braving the chilling morning air in a light shirt that stretched across his body, Ganner noted that there was a definite downside to defeating an invading force. For one, he and the angry mob had left a massive pile of Yuuzhan Vong bodies in the middle of the public square. For two, the slave-ships and transports that had burned up had broken up into pieces and dotted the scenery, a few pieces even crashing through the roofs of various houses and businesses. Those who lived in the area

were probably all still drunk from euphoria and whatever alcoholic drink they had imbibed to celebrate the victory. With the Peace Brigade banning cleaning droids only weeks earlier, there was no one available to take care of the mess. Which also meant that all the bodies and debris remained right where he had left them the previous day.

He walked through the battlefield, still unable to believe that he was alive. He *should* be dead. He wasn't a hero for crying out loud, he was only pretending to be one. What he had done shouldn't have worked, and yet, for some reason, it did. He knew he wasn't invincible. That one day his luck would run out and he'd be just like all the other bodies on the ground. How much longer could he pretend to be someone he wasn't? Hero of Palanhi? He would have gotten himself Jedi-shish-kabobbed if Pal'iva Konat and the mob hadn't rushed out of the spaceport. He wasn't a hero, just someone too stupid to get out of the way when he really should have.

He bent down and began to drag the corpses into one large pile, grunting in annoyance as he did. Did he really have to kill so many? He let the body fall and then moved to another. A morbid thought struck him. If he hadn't made it out of the gauntlet. If his body had been one of the fallen. What would his epitaph had been? *Here lies Jedi Knight Ganner Rhysode, he tried but was exposed for the fraud he is?*

Seeing his old classmate once more, memories of his childhood came rushing back. He had been the least popular kid in his school. He knew he had been a show-off, alienated others with his childish use of the Force. A misplaced datapad here, a levitating bucket of water there. The rejection of the other kids hurt, but he didn't let that stop him. He had pretended it made him happy, pretended he thrived on their insults and glares. He remembered thinking that if he pretended hard enough, maybe they'd actually start liking him. When his parents finally relented and sent him to the Jedi Academy it had been one of the happiest days of his life. He didn't have to pretend to be happy any more. He could just be Ganner, Jedi-in-training. Someone who could finally use his powers without being ridiculed or despised.

Then the war happened.

He smiled ruefully as he absently pulled another body from where it had fallen and dumped it with the rest. Almost fifteen years later and he was still pretending. Pretending to be a someone the galaxy could rely on.

"Deep thoughts?"

Ganner blinked as Maveri dragged another corpse to throw on top of his most recent addition. Her long black hair was in a single braid,

intertwined with a few strips of leather. She wasn't dressed at all like some wealthy aristocrat or high-society dame like the previous night. In fact, her street clothes looked positively utilitarian. "You fill out drab-gray well."
"Hoping to start a fashion trend," Maveri remarked, the soft green of her eyes matching her skin tone.
"Just thinking about what would have happened if I fell in battle," Ganner sighed.
"Well, for one, I would have wasted all that bribe money and several days to get here," Maveri said dryly.
Ganner laughed at that. "Yeah, that would have been rude of me."
"Never bothered you in the past," Maveri pointed out. "You did just sleep with my best friend in my house, in *my* bed."
"To be fair, I had no idea she was your best friend, that you even knew each other, or that it was your house," Ganner held up his hands. "And I have to say that your sheets are really comfortable."
Maveri lightly pressed her fist into his shoulder, then moved to collect another corpse. "If you had fallen, then those thousands in the spaceport, including my best friend, would be chattel for the Yuuzhan Vong. Most probably sacrificed in some bloody ritual to slake their sadistic thirst. If you had fallen, Palanhi would be a burning world, and the galaxy would mourn the loss of another Jedi."
"I was with you all the way until that last part," Ganner said with a tired grin. "So far, the galaxy seems to be doing its best to off every single Jedi out there. I highly doubt anyone would actually shed tears at my demise. I think that's why it was so easy to do what I had to do. I die. No one cares, so I have nothing to lose. If I somehow live then, hey, all the better."
"I take it back," Maveri murmured, studying his face. "You are completely different from the Ganner I knew back then."
"No apology needed. Not like you caught me at my best last night," Ganner deflected.
"I'm sure that if I had arrived an hour or two earlier, I would have," Maveri said cattily. "I'm trying to be serious here, Rhysode."
"I don't think I can let myself be serious for too long a time," Ganner sighed, running a hand over his chin and making a mental note to shave the stubble. "Might reveal something about myself that I don't like. I'm scary like that."
"How'd you get the scar?" Maveri asked gently, accepting his reasoning and changing topics to the visible mark on his face.
"Being too 'me,'" Ganner snorted. "I thought I knew more than this Jedi Master I was on a mission with, got overconfident and nearly got my

face permanent rearranged. Kept the scar as a reminder that I'm not all that I thought I was."
As the two spoke, the neighbors in the area slowly joined them in cleaning up the square. Some looked at Ganner reverently, others as if they were unworthy to even look at him. Several came up to thank him personally, and Ganner took it all with a broad smile and glib words of Jedi kindness.
"I noticed you don't have any of those diamond tattoo things on your face or hands," Ganner said to Maveri after a break in well-wishers and thankful Palanhians. "Don't all Mirialans get at least a few full triangles of them by now?"
"Haven't done anything noteworthy enough," Maveri answered almost too nonchalantly.
"Daughter of a HoloNet channel maven not doing anything noteworthy?"
"Fine, if you really must know…"
"I definitely must know now that you've put it that way."
Maveri shot him a dirty look. "I was eleven and my crush was going off to become a super Jedi to save the galaxy. I promised my mom and dad not to get any Markings of Destiny until I did something equally amazing and cool like my Jedi crush."
"You were a little girl then."
"My parents held me to that word," Maveri said wryly. "Dad's very big on keeping one's oath."
"So…it's basically my fault?" Ganner said with an incredulous laugh.
"Laugh it up," Maveri joined him.
"So what exactly do you have in mind that is equal to the amazingly cool things I've accomplished in life?"
"Pal'iva helped me come up with something last night."
"Why do I not like that smile?"
"Don't worry, I figured the only way I can top the amazingly cool things you do is by making sure the entire galaxy learns about it. I'm in discussions with the Galactic Star to publish a movie about your heroics in the Battle for Palanhi."
"What?"
"Pali will be doing the hard work," Maveri shrugged. "All I'll be doing is spending some of my too-many credits on a good cause."
"Pal'iva did warn you that my ego doesn't need inflating, right?"
Maveri rolled her eyes. "Among other things. But, yes. And this isn't for you, or for me really. You said the galaxy couldn't care less about Jedi dying. Pali and I are going to change that. This movie will hopefully be the first in a long line of them cataloging the victories and defeats of

the Jedi Order for the rest of the war. Right now, the galaxy might not grieve for you if you die, Ganner. But give Pali a few movies and there'll be mass funerals for every Jedi that falls. There'll be picketers at every Peace Brigade embassy. I figure the only way I'm going to top your heroics is by being the person that saves the heroes."
Ganner's jaw dropped and he stared at her nonplussed.
"Thinking too big?" Maveri asked with a smirk.
"I…uh…wow," Ganner exhaled. He sobered at the thought, his expression hardening. "You know that the Yuuzhan Vong are going to come down hard on you and your family when they learn you're sponsoring an anti-them propaganda campaign, right?"
"Benefits of having a bazillion credits," Maveri answered unconcerned. "Once the movies start being produced, my family and myself will go underground. It'll be like we've never existed at all. If the Vong shut down one movie studio, we'll just start another, and another. The word of what you Jedi are doing *will* get out. I promise you that."
"Well, if you're going to go that far, I might as well play it up," Ganner finally settled.
"Huh?"
"I'm Ganner Rhysode, Jedi extraordinaire and movie star," Ganner posed with his fists on his hips. "The cameras are going to love me."
"What did Pali and I create?" Maveri groaned, shaking her head. "By the way, here."
Ganner took the credit chit that Maveri handed to him. "Huh?"
"Apparently, my best friend decided to get you shirtless, dance with you in the sheets, and spill her heart out to you *before* you've even taken her on a single date. I've seen what you Jedi consider formal wear, and there's no way you're wearing those…bathrobes on a date with my best friend."
"Bathrobes!" Ganner sputtered. "They are time-honored garments…"
"Worn by cranky old men and women who aren't getting any and have to vent their frustration by making everyone else dress like them," Maveri countered, sticking her tongue at him.
"I'll show you venting frustrations!" Ganner mock glared.
Before Maveri knew what was happening, she was draped over one of Ganner's broad shoulders and staring down at the ground. Laughing, she pounded at his back. "Put me down you brute!"
"Nah uh uh, not until you apologize for calling Jedi clothing 'bathrobes,'" Ganner retorted, running through the central square with Maveri over his shoulder and onlookers staring at him as if he had lost his mind.

An important looking speeder pulled up, and Ganner tilted his head as members of Palanhi's military emerged.
"Jedi Knight Rhysode?" A colonel said, seemingly not at all fazed by the Mirialan draped over the tall Jedi's shoulders.
"That's me," Ganner asked.
"General Drado and President-elect Doria Anshal request your presence for a strategy session regarding the defense of Palanhi."
"Alright, I'll be right over."
"Errr…Jedi Knight Rhysode, might I ask what you're doing?"
"My job," Ganner patted Maveri's rear and earned himself an indignant squawk. "I'm working on Jedi-media relations. I was falling behind on my work so decided to start bright and ear….yeow!"
Ganner deposited Maveri back on solid ground and rubbed at his own pinch-injured behind.
"Serves you right," Maveri huffed, blowing a few strands of loose hair out of her face.
"Evidently I need to work on my negotiating skills," Ganner addressed the colonel, shooting mock-glares at his all-too-pleased Mirialan counterpart.
"Right…sir," the colonel blinked, clearly wondering how someone like Ganner could be the same person who had downed line after line of Yuuzhan Vong warriors in defense of the city's main spaceport. "If you'll come with us?"
"Go," Maveri waved him off good-naturedly. "You've already saved a spaceport and a conflicted reporter, now go save the entire system. I'll stay here and help clean up the mess you made."
"I'll try to make the Yuuzhan Vong and Peace Brigade guys die in more conveniently clean-upable locations this time," Ganner gave her a two-fingered salute.
"Thanks," Maveri smiled, her gratefulness addressing a myriad of things.
Ganner, sensing her thoughts, smiled back with the same warmth and tenderness. "And thank you."

NUR II NUR

Aboard the Tri-Scythe-class frigate Sebatyne, present day

"What do you have there?"
Jedi Sentinel Mathias Tahal grinned at the question from his closest friend and only other member of the Jedi Order who knew who his great, great grandfather was. "Doubly Great Gramps' lightsaber. My dad's people found it just before we were recalled. It's a little scorched, but still functional"

"The lightsaber so famous it has its own holo-vid series based on it?" Jedi Guardian Oriina Ekala asked, the blue glow of the hyperspace tunnel giving her white-blonde hair a greenish tint.
"It's not its fault it's been at some of the most pivotal battles in the last century." Mathias activated the lightsaber and its golden blade hummed to life. He took a few practice swings, before deactivating the blade and acknowledging his childhood friend. "Ori."
"You do know that every single time it was wielded in those 'pivotal battles', the one holding it died," Oriina's thin eyebrows creased in displeasure as she moved to Mathias's side. She glanced down at the saber in his hand. "The last one to wield it died fighting off an army of pirates all by himself."
"He did save millions of slaves," Mathias mentioned.
"He did get himself dead," Oriina said pointedly.
"Isn't that why we Sentinels have the Guardians around? So we don't get prematurely dead?"
"I can't beat a cursed saber," Oriina lightly swatted him. "Ever since your Doubly Great Gramps fell in the Battle of the World Brain, *every* person it's found its way to has *died* prematurely. There's a reason why the 'Golden Saber' movie series your family produces is called a romantic-*tragedy*."
"Ori…"
"And we're heading towards the stronghold of thousands of dark Jedi who want nothing more than to upset the balance of the Force and wipe us light Jedi out. Can you not *see* how this ends if you pick up that saber?"
"I thought the visions were for the Consulars and the Order of Caedus?" Mathias said, slightly annoyed by her superstitions. Though he loved her dearly—as a close friend—one of her more trying attributes was that she brought into the whole 'religion' of the Jedi Order almost as much as the non-Force-sensitive devotees. Her devotion was what had secured her a spot in the ranks of the Order of Rhysode, and he was overjoyed that they were often paired up on the same missions. He believed in the Force, but didn't follow her 'divine Force' interpretation. "Come on, Oriina. It's a family heirloom, nothing more."
"I have your full permission to get Alema to bind your spirit if you get yourself offed, then, if only to say 'I told you so'?" Oriina sighed in annoyance.
"Full permission," Mathias agreed, clipping Ganner's saber to his belt. "Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to me. Besides, it's not like we're on the frontlines or anything. We'll be well behind our own lines.

If the Dark Council forces do get to us, then we'll be in a galaxy of trouble because it'll mean they've killed everyone else, including the Sword of the Jedi."
"Korsyn know you have Ganner's sword?"
Mathias smiled at the mention of his boyfriend. "Yeah, he's all for it being brought to another era-turning battle. You know the Guardians in the Order of Solusar, they're like the polar opposite of whatever stance you take. Always makes me wonder how you and Zia make your relationship work."
"She humors me," Oriina said with a huff. "I humor her. We agree to disagree if we get in a fight."
"That it?"
"And we have fantastic make-up…"
"I really don't want to know about your bedroom activities," Mathias held up a hand. "You're happy, Zia's happy, that's all that matters. We'll be okay, Ori. Would the Force have the two of us become friends just to use me to hurt you?"
Oriina breathed out and shook her head, walking over to the viewport. "We cannot know what It, plans for us. Your death could be a way to test my devotion to the Balance. Or your death could be the catalyst needed for Zia and I to become even closer. There are many ways your passing could affect the flow of the Force, for good or ill."
"Still alive here," Mathias said flatly. "But thanks for sharing that you're extremely worried and care about me."
Oriina muttered under her breath, something that sounded like '*idiotic heathens'* to Mathias' ears. "Force, why do you test me so?"
"Watch, we get down there and you'll have worked yourself up for nothing."
"You do realize that the past, I don't know, a dozen times I've had a bad feeling about something, bad things normally followed," Oriina grumbled. She held out a hand and Ganner's lightsaber flew off of Mathias' belt and into it. "I swear it's like a family curse or something."
"Self-fulfilling prophecies," Mathias shook his head. "You also had a bad feeling when you wanted to ask Zia out, didn't you? Four years later and you two are married and as in love as ever."
"That first date, a team of robbers tried to hold-up the restaurant we were eating in," Oriina swished the saber around in an intricate flourish that Mathias knew he'd never be able to copy in his lifetime. "The second date, a malfunctioning hover-bus full of school children would have come crashing down into the park if Zia and I hadn't abandoned the paddle-boat we were in to stop its path."
"Third date?"

"Nothing happened, and after the first two, it was horribly boring," Oriina retorted, the light from the lightsaber highlighting her whimsical smile.
"Right," Mathias laughed. "But doesn't that mean the Force approved of the two of you? Putting you in the right place at the right time to save lives, creating a shared bond between you two? The lightsaber didn't have to come back to my family here and now. It could have stayed buried under the rubble of that underground, volcanic pirate base. Destroyed by magma, or crushed by rock. But it didn't. My family's people managed to dig it out, and they got it to me just as we were being recalled for this mission. If that isn't the Force saying I should have this weapon, I don't know what is."
Oriina deactivated the saber and floated it back to him. "Have it, yes. Use it? That's another story."
"Let's say I leave the weapon on the ship. We go down there and my lightsaber gets destroyed, malfunctions, or something. And then I get stabbed because I don't have Ganner's sword."
"Let's say you take the weapon, go down there, and in a stupid act of heroism, to save the lives of many, you decide to imitate your doubly great grandfather, *his* apprentice, *her* apprentice, and the line of previous owners."
"But the future isn't set in stone," Mathias said softly. "That's what we have the Order of Caedus for, to give us possible meaning to any visions we have. Why none of their alternative meanings are ever thrown out. The truth is, we just don't know what's going to happen when we get to Korriban. The future might be cruel, but it also might be kind."
Oriina sighed, conceding for the moment. She placed an affection hand on his shoulder. "Just know that both myself, your little sister, Zia, and Orsyn will be devastated if you choose to imitate Ganner Rhysode too closely."
"I know," Mathias murmured, his mind already drifting to the battle that lay ahead.

NUR II NUR

Palanhi, one-hundred and eleven years ago

Ganner wore a winning smile as disembarked the shuttle and waved at the plethora of holocams awaiting him. The lights flashed repeatedly, reporters shouting out question after question. Having long since acquired the necessary skills to handle such frightening masses, Ganner held his hands up and waited. Silence slowly fell, wide-eyed reporters and civilians who had flocked to see him gazing at him almost in awe.

"Thank you all for that warm welcome. It's good to be appreciated," Ganner began. "I will take a couple of questions, then give full interviews tomorrow. I actually have a date tonight and fear being late way more than those Yuuzhan Vong ships General Drado's fleet blew away. I mean, I don't want to be known as the Jedi who can save an entire solar system, yet can't make it to a simple dinner on time, right?"

The crowd laughed, the euphoria of the complete destruction of the Yuuzhan Vong invading force ensuring that the spirits were high and that any joke, no matter how bad, was a funny one.

"You're all too kind," Ganner said brightly. He scanned the audience, and decided to have some fun with the questions. "Okay, let's start off with the questions. Umm…you, over there. The guy who asked me earlier if I was the father of Mara Jade's love-child, right? Bring on your next question."

"Jedi Knight Rhysode, now that your cabal of secret Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong allies have staged the defeat of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet to secure your grasp on this system, is it true that you plan on conscripting the people of Palanhi into a secret religious cult in your name?"

"Who told you that?!" Ganner gasped, feigning complete shock and terror. "No one is supposed to know that!"

"So it's true?" The reporter said excitedly.

"It was supposed to be a surprise," Ganner said mournfully, nodding sadly. "I wanted to raise an army of the faithful, people who are just as skilled as drawing lines in the ground like I am. People who are more parts stupid than brave, and have egos big enough to protect everyone they care for. I would have called it the Order of Rhysode, but sadly, since you outed the plan, I'll have to think of something else to help the Jedi take over the galaxy."

The reporter blinked dumbly at Ganner, not quite sure what to make of the answer. His colleagues seemed likewise confused, not sure if Ganner was actually telling the truth or not.

"Okay, next question," Ganner suddenly said cheerfully, adding to the bewilderment of the reporters. Silence followed as they tried to organize their thoughts. "No? Okay, any interviews with me can be scheduled with the Galactic Star. I'll be in system for another few days to help wrap things up. Have a good evening and good celebrating!"

Ganner waved at the crowd of stunned reporters, quickly ducking into his awaiting limo-speeder before they could come to their senses. He closed the door, then tilted his head at the other occupant sitting across from him.

"Maveri?" Ganner said with a raised eyebrow.

"Change of plans," The Mirialan media heiress said in explanation. "The restaurant is too open, and there still may be Peace Brigade sympathizers on the planet. Also, Pali's a little famous now that she's connected with you, so we don't want to make her a target either."
"I heard about her plans to move to the *Errant Venture,*" Ganner said. He then eyed the revealing, forest-green dress that his childhood classmate was wearing, the silk material clinging to her body and showing just enough skin to be classy. "Still doesn't explain why you're all dressed up too."
"Do I have to hit you over the head with a two-by-four?" Maveri sighed. "Ganner Rhysode should know by now that a date with a single woman, no matter how amazing she is, is just too ordinary. A date with two amazing women, well, that's a different story. You did just save a solar system after all. Play your cards right and who knows what may come."
Ganner swallowed visibly. "Ganner Rhysode definitely approves of the change in plans. Ganner Rhysode would be brain-damaged to turn down such wonderful offer so long as both women know of such change in plans. Ganner Rhysode will definitely aspire to save more star systems in the future if this is what awaits Ganner Rhysode each time."
Maveri grabbed a pillow from the speeder's couch and promptly bopped him with it, giggling. "Gods, that's like that time when we were in school and the principal was telling your parents the list of things you did. '*Ganner Rhysode floated the fishtank outside of the classroom and dropped it on my speeder!' 'Ganner Rhysode used his unnatural powers to pull the underwear of several students in the class high above their waist! Worst yet, Ganner Rhysode dropped a student into the deep section of the swimming pool and laughed! This is the last straw!'* and on and on. And when your parents turned to you to ask you to explain yourself you said. '*Ganner Rhysode is completely innocent. Ganner Rhysode wasn't even in the room when the underwear rebelled against the bullies in the class. Ganner Rhysode loves fishes and would never sacrifice one to teach a tyrant a lesson. And Ganner Rhysode was present when the student in question took a flying leap into the swimming pool, but Ganner Rhysode would never deliberately cause harm to those who don't deserve it'.*"
Ganner laughed at that, shaking his head. "Wow, I can't believe you remember all that!"
"I was standing outside the classroom about to tell the principal that Shina was bullying me and heard everything," Maveri giggled. "Of course, you were kind of expelled the next day and sent off to the Jedi.

But still, that was memorable. First time anyone stood up for me too since I was that 'rich' spoiled girl that people only befriended for the free goodies."
"And nearly twenty years later, the two misfits meet up again," Ganner said fondly. "You sure Pal'iva's okay with you joining our date?"
Maveri pulled out a holocomm and held it in the palm of her hand. "Pali."
Pal'iva's image materialized a split-second later. "*Hey Veri!*"
"We're on our way, but Ganner's worried I used my undue influence over you to muscle myself into this date."
"*Sweet of you to care, Ganner. But it was my idea*," the Twi'lek grinned at Ganner. "*Veri's my best friend, and the two of you definitely need to catch up. We're all leaving Palanhi in a couple of days, so who knows when else we'll all see each other again in this war.*"
"Just wanted to make sure I wasn't doing something that would endanger my life," Ganner smiled. "I already have this pint-sized blonde Jedi after my reproductive organs for colluding against her with her boyfriend. Don't need a list of girls who want to maim me in every system I go to."
"Sounds like you," Maveri retorted dryly. "We'll see you in a bit, Pali."
"*Alright, the wait-staff are just setting up the meal now, so take your time*." Pal'iva gave them both a wave, and then hung up.
"We're going to your house?" Ganner asked, recognized the route the driver was taking.
"Secluded, private, and away from anything remotely resembling a galaxy-invading horde," Maveri confirmed. "Speaking of dates. Open up the compartment beneath that pillow next to you. We might not be going anywhere fancy, but I still have standards you know."
Ganner opened the compartment and found a neatly folded and pressed dress-suit. Its blue and black hues were very similar to the flamboyant Jedi Robes he had once worn. "Nice."
"Thought you'd like it," Maveri chirped. "Go ahead and put them on, we want to make a nice impression for Pali."
Ganner raised an eyebrow. "Put it on, here?"
"I saw everything when I caught you in my bed with her," Maveri reminded. "You're really going to be shy now? What happened to Ganner the Bold? Ganner, He Who Laughs at Death? Ganner the Impressive?"
"What was that last one in reference to?" Ganner asked cheekily, earning another pillow whack.
"Definitely not what you're hoping," Maveri snorted. "Now quit stalling."

"Yes, ma'am," Ganner said drolly. He shrugged off his all-purpose Jedi robes and pulled on the suit. He was not at all surprised that it fit him perfectly. "Very comfy."
"Should be," Maveri said. "Or I'll have a few words with the tailor who promised that he would take into account your massive…"
"Yes?" Ganner pressed.
"Ego," Maveri deadpanned. "It's why we couldn't get you a matching hat."
"My ego is the only thing keeping me in this war," Ganner drawled. "Otherwise I'd be running away screaming in terror."
"That's why Pali and I are going to do our best to turn you into a living god," Maveri smiled. "We'll do our best to make your ego so big, nothing will touch you. You're our meal ticket after all."
"Ah, there's the ulterior motive," Ganner chuckled. "How did you and Pal'iva meet anyways?"
"Media-studies classes at the uni," Maveri answered. "We had several projects together and grew close over cursing the complete liberal bias of this one instructor. For him, all the galaxy's problems could be traced back to Palpatine and his despotic regime. It was all Palpatine's fault, and the Rebel Alliance was completely blameless. Try to suggest that the Rebel Alliance didn't account for the fracturing of the Imperial chain-of-command and didn't have a clear plan for the many warlords and admirals that tried to carry on the Emperor's ideals and it was like an automatic failing grade. Force forbid you actually point out that the Rebel Alliance was toppling a government that kept order in hundreds of star-systems, without a clear plan or system to implement order in those regions after the fact. Not saying that the Empire was all that great either, but trying to replace their policies with something completely different and expecting things to work out for the best isn't the best socio-political solution in the galaxy."
Ganner smiled at Maveri's rant, and the media heiress saw it and blushed. "Feel strongly about it?"
"Shut up," Maveri reverted, averting her gaze. "Anyway, that's how Pali and I met. Second year of uni we were roommates in this apartment right off of campus. My family owned it of course, but she still insisted on paying rent. It was stupid really. Her parents were former slaves and barely had enough money to send her to college."
"So you went behind her back?" Ganner asked knowingly.
"Of course. Got the college to offer her a full scholarship, and an internship with the Galactic Star too," Maveri smirked. "And then you just made her year by being *you* and telling the station that you'd give

interviews to her and only her, have debates only if she were moderator."
"It's almost like we planned to make her a superstar," Ganner said.
"We're awesome like that," Maveri agreed.
The speeder pulled past the gates of her mansion and stopped at the front door. The driver opened the speeder doors and let the two of them out.
"Thanks, Silis," Maveri gave him a credit chit. "Have a night on the town on me. Don't think we'll need you for tomorrow either, so go celebrate with your family."
"Thank you Mistress Vixis," the driver bowed and got back into the speeder, zooming away.
"Mistress Vixis," Ganner offered Maveri an elbow.
"Jedi Knight Rhysode," Maveri took it with a tilt of her head and let him lead the two of them up the front steps.
"I could get used to living in the lap of luxury," Ganner commented as he opened the varnished wood door to the wood-paneled interior.
"Welcome, Ganner Rhysode the Opulent?" Pal'iva Konat greeted them, coming down a flight of stairs. She gave him a once over. "Really nice, Jedi Rhysode."
"You as well," Ganner whistled. Pal'iva was wearing an earthen-toned, almost wrap-like outfit that complimented her yellow skin. She also had on a traditional Twi'lek headdress with a sparkling yellow gem in the center.
"Why thank you, Jedi Rhysode," Pal'iva performed an exaggerated courtesy.
"Not Ganner yet?"
"Still haven't had dinner, much less desert," Pal'iva said with a coy smile, taking his opposite arm.
"I'm guessing we're not eating in the dining room," Ganner stated as the duo led him up the stairs.
"Good observation," Pal'iva said playfully.
Ganner grinned at the both of them. "I so love being me."

NUR III NUR

Horuset system, Present day

"Coming out of hyperspace now!" the pilot of the *Sebatyne* announced.
The *Tri-Scythe*-class frigate reverted to real-space along with the sizable attack force wielded by the Free Alliances, a conglomerate of some of the strongest galactic powers in existence.
"*All ships, this is Admiral Gar Stazi. Stick to your sectors and may the Force be with us*."

"*Dark Council Dread Fleet is straight ahead. Looks like they're expecting us.*"
"*They have their own seers too, Control. Probably sensed our build up weeks ago. Don't read too much into it, ours guys are better."*
"*Sentinel Terak Ekala of the Order of E'ron here. Leave the Meditation Spheres to us. The Veila has more than enough experiences dealing with those flying eyeballs."*
"Fleet copies. Admiral Vizsla, the Imperius-class Star Destroyers are yours. Happy hunting."
"Oya! Let's go vode!"
The fleet of the Mandalorian Empire and the hybrid vessels in the Jedi Order's command surged forward to greet the awaiting Dark Council defensive force. In response, the Dark Council Star Destroyers began firing warheads and turbolaser barrages at the approaching forces. Sith starfighters poured from their hangars in disciplined ranks, their Force-sensitive pilots linked together by the dangerous Battlemeld.
But the forces of the Free Alliances didn't flinch. Leading the way were the *Bikadin*-class Mandalorian heavy cruisers, their vertical, rectangular figures slicing through space as their turbolasers filled the void with a storm of green energy. The Mandalorian carriers followed, unloading their allotment of starfighters in the process. *Chekar*-class snubfighters roared outwards, supported by *Carud*-class stealth-attack fighters and *Galaar*-class bombers.
Using the Mandalorians as a screen, the hybrid, bio-mechanical vessels of the Order of E'ron danced about almost unnoticed amidst the bulky Mandalorian vessels. Commanded by a descendant of Anakin Solo himself, Terak Ekala, the renowned *Veila* communicated by yammosk-pulse to the other vessels in her wake. Each of these ships had a specific prey in mind and were content to let the Mandalorians be the bait.
Sure enough, bright white beams of energy blazed out from several sections of the Dark Council fleet. Rapidly uncloaking, then recloaking, a horde of Sith Meditation Spheres announced their presence with a very lethal barrage. One of the Mandalorian heavy cruisers caught the brunt of four columns of energy and was ripped apart as if its shields and armor hadn't even existed.
The two offending Meditation Spheres, however, didn't get to celebrate their kill for long. The *Veila* and the other hybrid vessels appeared to blink out of sight before dropping out of their micro-jump directly in front of the Spheres and unleashing a torrent of plasma at point-blank range. The two spheres erupted like overripe melons, and before the

Dark Council fleet could target the hybrid vessels, the bio-mechanical fleet had micro-jumped back behind the cover of the Mandalorian fleet. Several more spheres were eliminated in a similar fashion, though they did manage to wreak havoc on the Mandalorian formation and allow the Dark Council *Imperius*-class Star Destroyers to split the Mandalorian fleet. But no sooner had the Dark Council fleet try to encircle the Mandalorians then a new fleet emerged from hyperspace directly in the middle of the battle.

The ships of the Free Alliances that had yet to join the battle watched as the powerful Hapan War Dragon cruisers hammered away at the exposed flank of the Dark Council fleet. Hapan fighters joined the fray, and the battlefield was lit up in explosions, flashing lasers, and the streaking of missiles.

"*Landing forces, go!"*

"That's our cue," Jedi Master Ryva Durron, clicked her tongue. "Full speed ahead, helm."

"Full speed, copy."

The *Sebatyne* and dozens of other Free Alliances and Jedi Order vessels surged towards the main battle. Several Dark Council fleet elements broke off to intercept, and were promptly met by another force of Free Alliances vessels. Fel Imperium *Predator*-class TIE fighters met the Sith fighters in an ever-expanding battlefield. Free Alliances *Scythe*-class cruisers and Fel Imperium *Paelleon*-class Star Destroyers created a thin corridor for the landing forces to pass through.

Even then, the Dark Council fleets pressed the attack wherever they could. Though less in number, the Meditation Spheres were still delivering their capital ship-killing beams of Force-enhanced energy. Two beams cored through the prow of a Star Destroyer and annihilated the two frigates directly in front of the *Sebatyne*.

The helmsman saw it and promptly sent the *Sebatyne* in a climb away from the burning debris. A Meditation Sphere then decided to appear directly in the lane where the transports and light-attack craft were moving through.

"Not good!" Jedi Master Ryva Durron yelled as the Meditation Sphere's guns charged up for another attack.

Several missiles veered in from above the sphere and exploded just before contact, sending molten shrapnel piercing the energy-shields and tearing the craft to shreds.

"*Rogue Squadron here, we've got your back ground-pounders.*" A squadron of Free Alliances CF9 *Crossfire*-starfighters roared into formation ahead of the landing craft, waggled their wings, then streaked away in search for new targets.

"Remind me to buy them all a drink," Ryva exhaled.
"Second round's on me," the pilot agreed with a relieved smile.
"Follow the Death Knights in, nice and steady," Ryva directed.
"Copy," the pilot kept the *Sebatyne* behind the line of dropships that contained the Jedi Order's shocktroopers.
Nearly a century earlier, it had been decided that the Jedi Order would no longer be passive protectors of the galaxy. The threat of the Yuuzhan Vong, Killiks, One Sith, and Abeloth, had made the Order realize that in order to counter the violent nature of the dark side, they needed to be militant in turn. With Abeloth's defeat, the Jedi Order switched focus from a primarily diplomatic, non-aggressive order, to one that was heavily combat oriented. Like the different orders under the Dark Council's purview, the Jedi Order was divided up into separate factions. They still had diplomats, but they were now a minority when it came to the Order's make-up. Due to the closeness the Jedi Order had with the Dark Council-supervised Order of the Lost—those dark Jedi who could trace their lineage all the way back to the Lost Tribe of the Sith—a few of the Jedi Order's factions were even named in the ancient Sith tongue.
There was the more light-side oriented Order of Rhysode. The Order of Caedus focused on visions and their meanings, overseeing the holocrons in the Jedi Order's possession. Those in the Order of Solusar were the defenders of the various Jedi institutions in the galaxy. The Order of Paxis was most like the Jedi Orders of old and consisted primarily of the diplomatic and medical corps. The Order of E'ron—Yuuzhan Vong for 'the Enlightened'—was the research and development wing of the Jedi Order. And the Army of the Light was the Jedi Order's primary combat arm and largest faction in the Jedi Order.
There were also factions within the Jedi Order that were able to work side-by-side with Dark Council factions due to their blurring of the light and dark side boundaries. Among them were the Death Knights—Jedi Order commandos and wet-work operators. The Jensaarai—Jedi Order intelligence apparatus. And the Inquisitorious—the advanced guard stationed in the outer most areas of the galaxy with their headquarters in the Unknown Regions who kept an eye out for any extra-galactic threats.
Explosions rocked the *Sebatyne* as Korriban's planetary defense cannons, as well as their orbital defense platforms, came to life. Several dropships were blown away by the steady barrage of turbolaser and missiles.
"I thought the Order of Ren was supposed to take care of those stations," Ryva gritted out, her frigate shaking from a direct missile hit.

"One more like that ma'am and we're space-dust," the pilot reported.
"Fighters and frigates rising from the planet's surface!" A sensor operator announced.
"Give me the comm," Ryva ordered. "Admiral Stazi, Korriban planetary defenses are still operational! Are we sure the Order of Ren is on our side?"
"*That is affirmative, Jedi Master Durron. They'll have the defenses down, we have to give them more time.*"
"I copy admiral, but we could use some of your cruiser support, we're getting hammered out here." As Ryva spoke, the frigate *Madurrin* was blown out by a direct turbolaser hit to its bridge.
"*The reserves are being called in*," the Duros admiral said in turn. "*Stand by*."
"Standing by," Ryva remarked, gripping the pilot's chair as their vessel was rocked by a nearby picketship exploding.
"Ma'am, Dark Council planetary forces will be on us in five," the sensor operator reported.
"Wonderful," Ryva exhaled. "Remind me to tell the Jensaarai that their assessment of the defenses on Korriban needed to be a bit more thorough. Patch me through to our fighter escorts."
"Channel open."
"This is Jedi Master Durron. Rogue Squadron, Twisted Stars, Squadron Three-Zero-One, Squadron One-One-Three, break off from the transports and engage targets at will. Frigate and corvettes will cover the dropships as best we can. This is our one shot at Korriban and we can't break off now."
"*Copy, Master Durron*." Multiple fighter squadrons streamed away from the line of dropships and fired off an opening salvo of warheads at the approaching planetary forces. The planetary forces returned the greeting, and soon a second scrum erupted. Unfortunately for the GA and Jedi forces, the orbital defense stations were still firing on them.
"I'm not sure who's faulty information will get us killed first, the Jensaari or the Order of Ren," Ryva gritted out in annoyance. Her thoughts turned to her daughter on Bastion and she sent a silent prayer to the Force in hopes that Kyra would emerge from *her* ordeal relatively unscathed.
Another frigate, the *Hamner*, was ripped apart when several missiles slammed into its side. Which was bad considering the frigate had one of the Battlemeld's primary anchors onboard.
The flash of light washed over the *Sebatyne* and Ryva hastily checked the meld to ensure that it didn't fall apart as the death rippled through the Force-sensitives tied in. She needn't have worried. She allowed

herself to relax only slightly when the Order of Rhysode's Battlemeld expert, Mathais Tahal, expanded his senses to cover the newly open gap. In the background, she could even sense Mathais' protector lending her strength to his as the battle raged on all around them.
"Any time now," Ryva said impatiently. Their fighter escort was getting hammered despite the valiant effort they were putting up. There was just no way to avoid the combined firepower of the three orbital stations and the handful of orbiting gun-platforms facing their direction.
And then Free Alliances reserves entered the battlefield in the form of a small moon-sized battle-station. Escorting the battle-station were a collection of decidedly Imperial in nature capital ships and support vessels.
"The Fel Empire likes to take their sweet time," Ryva grumbled.
"*The Imperial Navy is here to save the day, like usual*," the almost gloating voice of the fleet commander came over the comm.
"Grand Moff Rulf Yage," Ryva smiled broadly and hit the comm to respond. "Yage! It's been a while since we fought side-by-side. Welcome back."
The head of the Fel Empire's Navy replied in a dry tone. "*I threatened to defect if Emperor Fel didn't let me shoot at the Empire's enemies personally. Don't ever let them promote you to a desk, Master Durron, you'll die of boredom."*
"I'll keep that in mind. I guess that means I should turn down their offer to join the High Council," Ryva laughed. "I'm not cut out to be a politician any more than my old man was."
"Sorry to interrupt, ma'am, but I think the Order of Ren have managed to seize control of the orbital defenses. The stations have stopped firing on us."
Glanced over, and then rolled her eyes in annoyance. "No, they had control the whole time. They were just hedging their bets. Dark Jedi, what can you say."
Minutes after the arrival of Grand Moff Yage's fleet, the orbital defense platforms began to fire on the Dark Council planetary defenders instead. What ships managed to get out of range of the orbital guns, found themselves tucked right up against the space-station. Several pulsar-cannon nodes glowed brightly and the thick green beams blasted out and obliterated the backbone of the planetary defenses in a single volley. The space-station slowly rotated so that it presented a fresh array of pulsar-cannons, and then proceeded to fire them at Korriban itself. The planetary defense batteries were vaporized in a heartbeat, the powerful guns blasting through the magnetic shield and

blowing a several meter-deep crater where each emplacement used to be.
"*Shawnkyr Station has expended its ordnance, falling back now,"* the battle-station's operators informed everyone. The battle-station emerged from Korriban's gravity shadow a few seconds later and jumped out of the combat zone, leaving nothing but destruction in its wake.
"Can I just say that I'm really glad the Fel Empire is on our side," the pilot said, shaking his head in shock.
"Same here," Ryva said dryly. "Then again, that's what you get when you combine Chiss tech, Killik manpower and knowledge, and Imperial ingenuity. The Fel Empire hasn't lasted this long because they were soft in defense."
"Ma'am, if that was a defensive weapon, I'm a Jawa's uncle," the pilot snorted.
"You're from Tatooine, Darklighter," Ryva said slyly. "Wouldn't be surprised if you were."
The comm-officer interrupted the banter. "Receiving landing coordinates from the Order of the Lost."
Ryva patted her pilot on the shoulder. "Take us in, helmsman. We're almost done with the easy part of this mission. All we have to do now is help topple some of the strongest and smartest Sith Lords and Ladies since the old days."

NUR III NUR

Mon Calamari/Dac a hundred and ten years earlier, just before the Battle for Mon Calamari

"*The two of you are beyond crazy,*" Media-empire heiress Maveri Vixis hissed at the other two. "*There are millions of Vong descending on Mon Calamari right now and the two of you are staying there!?*"
"We have a duty to the people, Mav-Four," Ganner said softly, the light in his quarters aboard the Star Defender *Viscount* dim. "If we run now, we doom every single living thing on Mon Calamari and before you know it, the Yuuzhan Vong will have an unstoppable water-based force full of shaped Quarens and Mon Cals."
"*And your excuse, Pali*?" The Mririalan glared at the projection of the Twi'lek.
From her position on one of the other capital ships, Pal'iva Konat smiled sadly. "*To record history, Veri. In a day or two, we will either all be dead, or it will be a moment history can ill-afford to forget. Every last ship we have available is here, all our eggs in one basket. Either the Yuuzhan Vong will break like a tide upon the shore, or wash us all out to sea."*

"Now I know you've been on Dac too long. You're using ocean metaphors," Raveri hissed, her face a mask of anguish. "*Isn't there any other way? I've seen the numbers, there is no way you can survive this.*"
"Maveri," Ganner smiled tiredly. "I'm Ganner Rhy…"
"*Cut that bantha fodder,*" Maveri snapped. Her raised voice caused a crying sound in the background.
"*Veri, is that a baby*?" Pal'iva asked incredulously.
"*Heir to the Vixis fortune,"* Maveri answered, moving out of the camera range before holding up a chubby little child in her arms. "*Almost two years old and getting big fast.*"
"Who's the lucky guy?" Ganner asked with a soft grin as the toddler reached out to grab at Maveri's long hair while trying to climb up into her lap.
"*Ouch,*" Maveri's eyes flickered back to him as she cradled her child, then she looked away. "*The father's a no one, really. Unlike you brave heroes, he could die tomorrow and no one would ever know. I just met him in passing, shared a few nights of passion, then we went our separate ways.*"
"Too bad for that guy then," Ganner remarked. The toddler got distracted by the sound of his voice and turned to Ganner's holo-image on Maveri's side. Ganner laughed when the holo-emitter showed only a tiny fist as the toddler tried to grab Ganner's image. "What's this little guy's name?"
"*Go on, tell him*," Maveri encouraged the suddenly shy child. When he shook his head in refusal and buried his face into her chest, she sighed. "*Ganner*."
"Yes?" Ganner blinked.
"*His name is Ganner you dolt. Though I might have to change it if you're going to do something so stupid as sacrifice yourself for the good of the galaxy.*"
Ganner was momentarily stunned into speechlessness. "You…you named a kid after me? Are you crazy?"
"*I'm not the only one. Did you know that the most popular male name on Palanhi right now is 'Ganner'*?" Maveri answered back, using the child as a pretense for not looking at the Jedi on the holocomm. "*You survive the battle at Dac somehow and you'll probably be one of the most popular names in the galaxy. Especially after Pali's people finish up their movies on you.*"
"Maveri…" Ganner trailed off again. What exactly was one supposed to say after *that*?

Maveri smiled wanly at him, as if she knew what he was thinking.
"*Don't worry about me, okay Ganner? Focus on the unstoppable army of extra-galactic aliens wanting to destroy all life as we know it. I'm fine, my family's resources can take care of both me and this unexpected but welcomed addition to it. You and Pal'iva just focus on getting out of your mess in one piece.*"
"*I'm sooooo holding that baby when this is over"* Pal'iva gushed, nodding in agreement.
"And I'll give you a list as to why it's very bad to name a kid after me," Ganner added with a chuckle. "The dad had no say in the matter?"
"*Like I said, it was a fling of sorts. The dolt didn't even know I was pregnant when we parted. Just as well, he probably would have come up with something utterly headache-inducing.*"
"*Hey Ganner, if you had a kid, what would you name him or her?*" Pal'iva asked brightly, though her attention was still obviously on the toddler.
Ganner tilted his head in thought, his expression sobering. "Well, if it were a girl, it'd be something like 'Hope' or 'Faith'. A guy? Probably something cooler, like 'Lance' or 'Adventure'."
"*You'd name your kid 'Adventure'?"* Maveri said with a raised eyebrow.
"*And how is Lance and Adventure cooler than Hope or Faith?*" Pal'iva asked in the same tone.
"It sounded better in my head," Ganner protested. "Besides it's not like I'm going to have kids any time soon. Maybe after the war is over I'll find someone who can put up with my ego for prolonged periods of time and settle down. But that's still years away. I have plenty of time to refine my names."
"*I'd definitely like to meet that woman when you do decide to settle down,*" Maveri said with a fond smile.
"Probably not happening," Ganner replied with a mock shudder. "It'll take a great deal of insanity to deal with me, but hearing from someone who knows me too well will probably be the sand grain that broke the bantha's back."
Suddenly Ganner's quarters was lit up in a red warning light, and Ganner's head snapped up. An intercom message blared throughout the Star Defender and the Jedi Knight smiled wanly at the two women.
"Well, looks like the Yuuzhan Vong advance guard have arrived. Talk to you when this is all over, Maveri. Pal'iva, tell your reporters to always film scar-side first, makes me look more roguish and dashing."
"*Will do,*" Pal'iva laughed. "*Veri, see you soon*."
Pal'iva image flickered off. Ganner moved to end his connection when Maveri spoke up, almost blurting. "*Wait*."

"Maveri?" Ganner said in confusion.
Maveri glanced at the child in her arms for a long moment, then smiled and shook her head. "*Never mind. It's nothing. Just focus on making it out of that mess alive. You do and I'll let you spoil my son crazy.*"
"His mom is a multi-billionaire, he'll be spoiled crazy anyways," Ganner pointed out jovially. "But I'll make sure I visit whatever corner of the galaxy your dad has stashed you when this is over. Promise."
"*I'll hold you to that, Rhysode*," Maveri said in a softer voice, her gaze lingering on him.
"Hey I just noticed, but are those Markings of Destiny right under your lip?" Ganner blinked, wondering how he had missed the trio of diamond-like tattoos that were an identifying factor to Maveri's race.
To his surprise, Maveri smiled almost sadly. *"They are. I found a way to preserve your legacy even if the worse should happen*. *My parents deemed that a fulfillment of my promise and granted me permission to take my first marks.*"
"Congratulations," Ganner said. He saw the conflicted look on her face. "What's wrong?"
"*Nothing,*" Maveri took a deep breath and forced a happier smile onto her face. "*Nothing, I shouldn't keep you anymore. Good luck, and… live.*"
"I'll do my best," Ganner answered tenderly.
She looked down and away, and then ended her end of the connection first.
Ganner stared at where her holo-image had been for another few, long seconds, but was snapped back to reality at the activation of the klaxon alarms blaring in the background. Pushing aside all thoughts of his communications, he slapped on the last of his pilot's gear and hurried to join Jaina in the others in the hangar bay.
Time to play hero again.

NUR III NUR

In orbit over Coruscant, before the Battle for Coruscant

"I'd never thought I'd see Coruscant like this," Pal'iva Konat murmured, staring up at the war-ravaged planet from Zonama. "To think that two years ago I was just a backwater field-reporter scrambling to make a name for myself. Now…now I'm in the middle of it all, staring up as the capital of the civilized galaxy burns itself to ash, about to participate in the fate-of-the-galaxy end-game."
"Two years ago I was an obscure Jedi with an ego too big for his own good. Look at me now, most of the Yuuzhan Vong revere me as a god and I'm the most famous Jedi on the HoloNet after the Skywalkers and

Solos," Ganner remarked glibly, coming to stand next to Pal'iva among a pile of supply crates.
"I'm sure that doesn't help your ego problem any, Jedi Rhysode" Pal'iva remarked with a wry smile. They settled into a comfortable silence as the crews to the other ships made the final preparations before the last battle. Pal'iva turned from Coruscant to look at her Jedi companion. "Do you think about the future often?"
"*Think* about the future? Or just think about it?"
"There's a difference?"
"*Thinking* about the future has gotten pretty much every single Jedi more famous than me in a galaxy of trouble. Thinking about the future is a fun exercise full of what-ifs and has-beens."
Pal'iva studied him, her lekku twitching slightly. "Both."
"I *think* about the future almost never," Ganner shrugged, he hopped onto a nearby cargo crate and sat down. "Why spoil what's to come, especially if it isn't set in stone. *Thinking* about the future gets Jedi into trouble because by the time the future they've seen has arrive, they're already looking ahead. They become so worried about the future they don't take the time to live in the present, to actually enjoy life. So what if there's some dark threat on the horizon? I mean, let's face it, there'll always be *something* out there, and no amount of thinking about it will make it go away. I could die in this coming battle, I could die a hundred years from now slipping on a bath-towel or being bludgeoned to death by Ewoks. Frankly, I don't really care. When my time comes, it'll come, and I hope I meet it head-on being the person I've always been. Ganner Rhysode, Jedi, actor, side-kick, and hero-impersonator."
"And just thinking about the future?"
"I do *that* all the time," Ganner smiled whimsically. "I sometimes wonder what I'd be if the Yuuzhan Vong War hadn't broken out. I mean, I was a hot-headed jerk when it began. Only cooled off after nearly getting my face sliced open and people killed because of that hot-headedness. After being picked on for so long as a kid, I let being a Jedi go straight to my head. I mean, I was Ganner Rhysode the awesome, Jedi extraordinaire, who knew better then you because I could use the Force. If you had met me when I was *that* Ganner Rhysode, you'd have probably whacked me over the head with your cam-droid."
"I have some idea," Pal'iva said with a coy smile. "To create a movie about your life, we had to interview those who knew you when you were *that* Ganner Rhysode."
Ganner groaned. "Please tell me you're kidding."
"Jedi Master Horn was very informative," Pal'iva chirped with a laugh, taking a seat next to him and letting her head rest on his shoulder.

"I'm surprised you didn't make a spin-off series about what the galaxy would be like if I had turned out exactly like what Master Horn was afraid I'd turn out as. Does that make sense at all?"
"It does. And it's on my to-do list. Probably after the war dies down and the galaxy needs some laughs, though," Pal'iva grinned toothily. "Maveri did give me an unlimited budge when it comes to make holo-dramas about your life…and roads not taken."
"As long as you get someone who can act to play my role," Ganner surrendered. "The last thing I want is for my cool sayings to be spoken by some two-bit hack who makes his livings doing pet-food commercials."
"The Galactic Star would never besmirch the great name of Ganner Rhysode in that manner," Pal'iva said mockingly.
"You'd just do it in other ways, that's a relief," Ganner drawled, lightly nudging her.
"You did say we could do anything to raise the morale of a battered and defeated galaxy in search of their next great hero."
"Sacrificing myself for the good of the galaxy. That definitely sounds like me," Ganner chuckled.
Pal'iva smiled as well, returning her gaze back to the sky above. "What do you think about when you imagine your future?"
"Not much, actually," Ganner shrugged. "I figured after I get tired of saving the galaxy I'd retire to some backwater world where no one has even heard of me. Disappear into obscurity and let the rest of the galaxy make up their own endings for the Great Ganner Rhysode. I'm sure they'll come up with some pretty good ones too."
"Family?"
"A kid, maybe two so the kid's not lonely," Ganner said pensively, a smile playing on his face. "We'd have beach-front property so they'd get to play in the sand and splash in the ocean while I look on from my recliner. I'd have a cold drink in one hand, my wife in the other, and we'd just sit there and watch the sun set every day."
"Would you train your kids to be Jedi?"
"To be honest, I don't think I would," Ganner said after another moment of thought. "I mean, who'd want to curse their children by raising them to save the galaxy? Nope, the only things my kids are going to be saving are their sandcastles from the waves and the occasional animal that wanders onto our stretch of the beach. Sure I'd teach them how to use the Force. But only for the practical stuff. Like fetching another cold one from inside the house, levitating dirty-laundry off the floor and into the washer. That sort of thing."

Pal'iva giggled "I'm sure generations of Jedi are rolling in their graves at the moment."
"Their fault for not training this generation of Jedi better," Ganner smirked.
"Hey…Ganner?" Pal'iva said in a softer voice after another moment of silence.
"Yeah?"
"We're going to make it out of this war, right?"
Ganner glanced at the smaller female tucked against his side and gently took one of her hands. "Can't promise you one way or the other, Pal'iva. Like I said, if this is our time, then we should face it tall and proud, glad that we've had this long in this galaxy to make what little difference we could. I can tell you though, that I'm going to be doing my best to survive. Being a Force Ghost has never really appealed to me, and I think I can put off exploring that Great Beyond for another century at least."
Pal'iva released a slow breath, squeezing his hand. "Thanks for being honest."
"Thanks for helping to make this war fun," Ganner said in turn. "If there's one thing about the future I'm looking forwards to is binge-watching ever single holo-drama you've made about me in this war. Then, maybe I can add my own commentary track and you can re-release the vids for even more money. I'm a god to some people, so they should care about what I have to say, right?"
It was Pal'iva's turn to nudge him, and she giggled softly again. "We'll definitely get a 'special edition' of your exploits set up."
Footsteps on the rocky ground intruded their little bubble in the universe.
"Hey Valin, what's up?" Ganner asked the young teen.
Valin Horn smiled faintly. "Sorry to interrupt, but it's time."
Ganner let out an exaggerated sigh as he stretched and hopped off the cargo-crate. "I guess it is. Everything all set?"
"The dropship is fueled and ready, our commando team is also onboard," Valin reported.
"Well, Ms. Konat, it's been nice chatting with you," Ganner tipped an imaginary hat. "Stay safe out there, ya hear?"
Pal'iva rolled her eyes. "And you as well, Jedi Rhysode. Make sure you survive this thing so I can make a living off of making movies about the rest of your very long and no doubt exciting life."
"Alright, Jedi Horn," Ganner winked at Pal'iva over his shoulder. "Lead the way. We have a planet to liberate and a war to end."

"Almost feel sorry for anyone who tries to stop us," Valin chuckled in excitement.
Ganner draped a brotherly arm around Valin's shoulders as he laughed. "Woe the person who gets in the way of *the* Ganner Rhysode and his army of greatness."
"'Army of Greatness'?" Valin looked to the older Jedi askance. "Army of Supreme Power?"
"You are god," Jedi Knight Natua Wan pointed out as they joined up with the awaiting dropship. "And we are under *your* command."
"You're right, Green Girl," Ganner beamed, and then struck a pose in the dropship doorway. "All who dare oppose the Army of Rhysode and the Supreme Greatness himself will fall before us this day."
"Here, here!" The commandos onboard laughed despite the seriousness of the mission to come.
Ganner strapped himself into the seat and grinned at the others onboard. "It's going to be good fighting with you all."
"Likewise, Jedi Rhysode," a Hapan commando inclined her head.
Ganner banged the side of the hull. "Okay pilot, take off. Let's go make history."

NUR IV NUR

Korriban, Present day, Day 8 of the attack on the Palace of Darkness

Mathias Tahal wiped his forehead as the harsh Korriban sun beat down on the dusty Sith homeworld. Despite the shade of an ancient Sith monument nearby and the shelter provided by the niche in the cliff-side, the oven-like heat was just as oppressive as the dark side aura that permeated the planet. He took a sip from his canteen and stood, his ten-hour shift in the Battlemeld over. The fighting had been some of the bloodiest since the Legacy Wars with countless losses on both sides. Despite being hemmed in, the Dark Council and the forces at its command showed no sign of surrendering any time soon. Worst yet were the various 'surprises' the Dark Council's forces had unleashed as they fought to the bitter end. Each time a new surprise was unleashed, dozens, even hundreds of allied soldiers and Jedi were lost.
"That bad, huh?" His trance-protector, Guardian Oriina Ekala, asked grimly. She had been leaning against the same cliff-face ever vigilant for anything that might want to take advantage of his meditative state.
"Another battalion was wiped out," Mathias exhaled, accepting the strength she loaned him.
"I felt the mass death. What was it this time?"
"As best as I could tell? Some sort of Thought-Bomb. I think we just encountered the first dark Jedi suicide bomber. Before Jedi Master Drok

fell, I saw this tattooed dark Jedi rush their lines and then a backlash of Force-energy literally ripped the lives out of everyone in a thirty-meter radius," Mathias answered wearily.
"Wonderful," Oriina groaned. "And I thought the genetically-altered Zillo beasts were trouble."
"Don't forget the altered Terentateks they unleashed yesterday," Mathias shuddered, having also been in the meld when a pack had been unleashed and massacred a combined Jedi/dark Jedi-led assault. "It's like the Dark Council knows they're not getting out of this so they're…"
"Shhhh!" Oriina said suddenly, her entire body tensing as she scanned their immediate area. Several dozen kilometers away from the frontlines, there shouldn't have been any need for the Force to warn her of something afoot. The uneasy feeling continued, so she held out a hand and her lightsaber flew into it. A blade of the deepest violet flashed to life from the yorik-coral hilt. She held out her other hand at the small of her back, and an amphistaff crept its way from her sleeve and into her hand, becoming a deadly staff in the blink of an eye. Mathais very carefully began to minimize his Force-profile, allowing Oriina's to become the dominant presence on the ridge. The seconds ticked by uneventfully, and then a flurry of action unfolded all at once. Oriina whirled around, her foot spinning out to kick an attacker wearing a ooglith cloaker square in the chest. At the same time, her two weapons twirled about to bat aside attacks from several different directions. Now that the attackers were moving rapidly, their cloak of Nuun rippled, giving them the appearance of fleeting ghosts in the afternoon sun. Oriina's weapons hissed again and again as she fended off the trio of attackers with skill and precision.
"The Force is my shield," Oriina chanted. She pinned one of the attackers against the rocky wall she and Mathais were using as cover with her amphistaff. Then she literally caught a lightsaber blade of a second attacker with her free hand. The assassin let out a surprised exclamation shortly before her own violet blade was pushed through his face.
More coming, Mathais sent through their meld.
"No worries, the Force is my weapon," Oriina continued, thrusting her free hand and wave of Force-energy lifted several new additions to the fight up into the air and off of the nearby ledge. "The Force guides my actions, controls my fate."
The assassin with the amphistaff through his shoulder managed to pull it free, only to find Oriina standing right in front of him. He blinked. Her saber flashed through the air several times, and she whirled back to

the other attackers as the assassin fell apart into several pieces behind her.
"And if It should deem I fall today, I go willingly into its embrace to rejoin those who came before me," Oriina kicked out the knee of yet another attacker, whirling around to elbow him hard, and then deflecting another two sabers at once. "Should it let me live, I will continue to remain faithful to It and the Balance It represents."
Several of the incoming assassins noted Mathais where he was crouched behind a nearby boulder. One of them thrust his hand out to send the boulder flying at Mathais. Mathais' own eyes snapped open and he countered the shove with one of his own. The boulder flew back towards the assassins. Closing his fist, Mathais shattered the boulder, turning it into a storm of lethal projectiles that pelted the assassins.
"Die Jedi!" An assassin leaped in from behind Mathais, only to find his feet never touching the ground.
"You first." Mathais jerked his head and sent the floating assassin bowling into his brethren.
A crackle of lightning scorched the air. Mathais held both hands and caught the barrage, then redirected it at an attacker charging him with a lightsaber. The lightning user aborted his attack, only to gasp as a barrage of green lightning raked his body from behind and temporarily paralyzed him. Oriina turned her barrage of lightning onto several others, as Mathais dispatched the disabled dark Jedi.
However, more attackers still came much to both Oriina and Mathais' surprise. The two fought on but were slowly pushed back to the very ledge that had claimed several of their attackers.
"I think we just ran into their flanking force," Mathais deadpanned.
"The Force placed us in the right place at the right time," Oriina agreed, a sheen of sweat covering her Korriban-tanned skin.
"Can the Force not get us killed then? I kind of like living."
"Don't make fun of the Force," one of the dark siders said mockingly. "My cousin knows what she's talking about."
Mathais recognized the voice immediately. "Alema? Alema Solo?"
"Way to blow my cover," one of the stealthed dark Jedi said with a sigh.
"Technically, you did call me 'cousin'," Oriina said with a hint of amusement.
"I guess I did. Oh well." Two lightsabers emerged, one blood-red the other an almost pure white with yellow and blue hues oscillating in the beam. Before the line of dark Jedi on either side of her knew what was happening, she had carved through a swath of them with the help of several others.

When the dust had settled, there was an almost neat line of dark Jedi laid out on the baking Korriban cliffs. Peeling off their masquers were a dozen more dark Jedi in heavy-looking black robes.
"Isn't it hot wearing those in this weather?" Mathais asked mildly.
"We're Sith, we like suffering," Alema retorted. She deactivated her lightsabers, spun them around in the palms of her hands like blasters, and reattached them to her belt. One of her sabers was a standard chrome-black hilt with saber cross-guards that denoted her Order of Ren membership. The other was more unique and in direct contrast with the first. Made of carved golden ivory-colored wood and engraved blue-hued metal, her white-bladed saber was an artifact of the light and appeared out of place on the homeworld of the Sith. "Hey little cousin, still alive?"
"The Force still favors me for now," Oriina smiled warmly. "And it smiles on you too, it appears."
"We were beginning to think that something had happened," Mathais said. "The attack wasn't supposed to turn into a siege of the Palace of Darkness."
"Tell me about it," Alema Solo grumbled. "I get enough flak from your bosses about not being 'fully dedicated to the cause'. Every single thing that goes wrong has to be my fault."
"Those who truly know you know that you would never side with the murderers of your parents," Oriina said reassuringly.
"I don't know, 'Riina, there are some crazy people in my outfit. Some of them even killed their parents themselves. Daddy and mommy issues the lot of us," Alema chuckled tiredly, removing her mask.
"Alema!" Mathais gasped in shock. A recent and wicked lightsaber burn marred her once 'genetically perfect' face, rendering her blind in one eye. Her other eye still shone a mischievous blue, as if she was enjoying his horror.
"Gift from the Master of Ren for betraying the Order," Alema said with a lopsided Solo-style smile that looked a bit creepy with the fresh lightsaber brand scarring one side of her face from cheek to forehead. "Don't worry, he looks a lot worse than me. Never thought I had it in me to kill a member of the Dark Council. Was kind of fun."
"If you're here and not opening the gates to the palace…" Oriina trailed off.
"Yeah, my coup didn't exactly go as expected," Alema sighed. She gestured at those with her. "Big-Dark-and-Greedy has this Sith Holocron that brainwashes people. Several of the masters I was counting on were twisted and killed most of my supporters before I could get to Korriban. The ones left, well, you're looking at them."

"You said you had a hundred supporters," Mathais said, aghast. "And that you were certain you'd get hundreds more."
"I know. I hope Tyree has better luck with the ones she chose," Alema sighed with a nod. "I left her several of my more trusted Sabers. Now that I think about it though, we probably need them more. Anyways, my group and I hitched a ride with this flanking group and here we are."
"We should return to Master Durron," Mathais looked to Oriina. "She'll know what to do."
"Agreed," Oriina hooked her own weapons to her belt then took a few light steps before hugging Alema. "it is good to see you again."
Alema awkwardly patted her back, glancing at her fellow Knights of Ren. "Great, great, you too 'Riina. Enough hugging though. You're kind of ruining my whole 'grrrr I'm a Sith' vibe. I have a rep to protect you know."
"It'll survive," Oriina mumbled, not letting go. "You know how worried I get when you go deep-cover. When mom and dad took you and Ben and Luke in, you were like the cool big sister I never had. You even dressed up as a nerf and gave me and Ben and Luke nerf-back rides."
"Yup, dying fast. My rep is dying *really* fast," Alema said drolly, taking a step back. She glared at the Knights of Ren with her, her blue eye flashing poisonous yellow. "Problems people?"
"No, ma'am," they chorused.
"There, now it's back," Mathais muttered.
"You do that on purpose," Alema glowered at Oriina.
Oriina just smiled angelically. "Do what, Alema Ren?"
Alema allowed the faintest smiles to crease her scarred face, but it was gone in a second. She fitted her mask back onto her face and gestured with her head. "Unfortunately, as great as this family reunion has been. We really have to get moving. Big-Dark-and-Greedy has taken a page out of the 'Insane Sith Lords' monthly and is trying to become immortal in one of the worst ways possible."
"I can't think of any ways of becoming immortal that are actually good," Mathais spoke out.
"Shush," Alema gritted out. "This is serious. If the Free Alliances stay in this system too much longer, they're all going to get wiped out. That's a certainty."
"How?"
"You know how the Meditation Spheres' Force-cannons are created, right?"
"The Knights of Ren leaked that information to the Free Alliances," Oriina nodded. "They require the sacrifice of at least a hundred souls.

The more sacrificed in the creation, the stronger the weapon. It's why the Free Alliances forced the Dark Council to sign a treaty banning their creation."
"What type of weapon do you think a billion deaths will create when powered by the Force-potential of the Dark Council?" Alema said grimly.
"You're kiddin'!" Mathais blurted, stopping in his tracks.
"It was done slowly, started before I was even born," Alema shook her head. "A refugee ship here, a bunch of orphans there. People who wouldn't be missed. Remember that mining accident in the Roche system a couple years back? The thousands of miners kicking the bucket in an industrial accident? That was Big-Dark-and Greedy using an ancient soul-capturing thingy based off of a Sith holocron he found on Yavin."
"To sum it up, he has the galaxy's biggest Force-cannon primed inside the palace?" Oriina said sharply.
Alema nodded. "Yeah, the entire council has been building up its charge since the assault began. They're using Vongshades to keep their activities from being detected by the Jedi in the area. In two days, the cannon will be fully ready to fire. When it does, every single living thing on this planet and in this system is going to be wiped out. Big-Dark-and-Greedy is then going to use that life-energy for himself and become immortal. We have to stop him now or things are going to get a whole lot worse for this galaxy."

NUR IV NUR

"As it stands right now, we cannot push into the Palace of Darkness without significant losses," commander of the Free Alliances ground forces and descendant of the famed Wedge Antilles, General Paulu Friedman said grimly. "They have several artillery emplacements in the palace itself that create a protective umbrella that extends as far as ten kilometers out. Their defense shields are powerful enough that we cannot penetrate it with an orbital strike. And their network of tunnels and bunkers is proving difficult enough without their surprise of the day. We lost Masters Drok and Corso to their new suicide berserkers and nearly had the entire right flank collapse in on itself because of that. Their air-defenses are substantial. With all due respect to your plan, Mistress Ren, I do not see how we can get a force inside the palace to stop this weapon within the time-frame given."
"*Then perhaps we should begin the evacuation of our forces*," Grandmaster Kol Skywalker suggested, his hologram flickering. "*We'd have to leave the heavy equipment behind, but at least our people will be safe.*"

Commanding the Imperial Knight forces, Imperial Knight Antares Draco's hologram scoffed. "*Evacuate? In our moment of triumph*? *No disrespect meant, Grandmaster, but the Imperial Knights did not come here just to run away. If we need to crash our cruiser into the shields to give the rest of you an opening, then that is what we will do.*"
"I do not think it will come to that, my friend," sister to the Queen Mother of Hapes, Anala Djo, remarked wryly. She looked to the others. "We might not be able to get all our people inside, but what of a few strike-teams? The main forces can mount what looks like a final push, drawing the attention of the defenders. Our strike teams can go in and neutralize the Dark Council."
"*They're going to have to do it with no orbital cover,*" Admiral Vizsla said evenly. "*We have orbital control over the entire planet save the area above the Palace. Their fleet withdrew into the cover of several powerful Force-cannons mounted within the palace itself and we cannot mount a direct attack without taking heavy losses. Grand Moff Yage could theoretically bring his battle-station back in, but we are unsure if its weapons will have an affect against so large a clustering of Force-sensitives.*"
"We have no other choice if we want to stop the Emperor's plan," Anala replied firmly. "We all know the danger the man represents. He did not emerge during the Legacy War with the rest of the One Sith, and instead chose to bide his time and grow even stronger. When High Lord Caedus passed on, he emerged, killed Caedus' son and grandson, and assumed control of the Dark Council. It was foolish to hope that things would not come to a head eventually."
"Jedi Solo, would you be able to get a strike team inside the Dark Palace?" Kol Skywalker looked to Alema.
The blonde-haired young woman grimaced. "Depends on how big a strike-team you're talking about. They'd have to be masters at concealing their presence either through the Force or Vongphase, otherwise they'd be dusted against the Dark Council."
"The Order of Rhysode and the Death Knights," Master Ryva Durron spoke up. "Both factions are skilled in both concealment and combat."
"We'll leave choosing the strike team up to you then, Master Durron," Kol inclined his head. "I'll personally oversee the frontal assault to ensure that the attention of the Dark Council is on us. Ducha Solo, the assistance of you and your children will also be appreciated in this matter."
"You will have it," Anala confirmed. "Master Durron, may the Force favor the bold."

"Good luck," Ryva tilted her head in acknowledgment. "In two day's time, we'll know whether or not we've just helped a mad-man become a god."

NUR IV NUR

"Master?" Mathais said in disbelief.

"All the other positions have been filled save for one. I need someone who has mastered the Battlemeld for this, Sentinel Tahal," Ryva said evenly. "You and your guardian are also well versed in resisting the allure of the darker side of the Force. Both will be needed to support the strike-team."

"I'm honored, Master Durron," Oriina managed after a few seconds of mimicking a goldfish.

"Honor me if you two get out of this alive," Ryva said with a dark smile. "I don't appreciate sending good people to their deaths, but this is as close to a suicide mission as you can get. Your team will have no support if things go wrong, and you're up against the best the Dark Side has to offer. Chance are some, if not most of you will die trying to get this done."

"You need to work on your motivational speeches, Master," Mathais groaned.

"I'm not one to sugar-coat the situation, Sentinel Tahal. If you wanted the bright and happy outlook, you should have joined the Order of Paxis," Ryva exhaled slowly. "Get this done or we're all dead. Motivational enough for you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mathais acknowledged wanly.

"Head to the forward command center. Alema Ren is waiting to take you through whatever back-way into the palace that's available."

"Ma'am." Both Mathais and Oriina saluted sharply, then gathered their gear and emerged from the tent that had been their quarters.

Their booted feet crunched on the gravelly ground as they sprinted to an awaiting speeder. All around them the rest of the Free Alliances' forces began gearing up for what was more than likely their final push on the palace. Walkers of various types moved into position behind a flotilla of speeders and land-tanks. *Rakamat* and other creatures tended to by the Order of the E'ron brayed and bellowed as the sense of unease raced throughout the camp. A frontal assault was probably no less suicidal than the mission the strike-team was about to embark on, but orders were orders.

"The Force telling you anything about this mission?" Mathais asked lightly as the landscape whisked by them.

Oriina closed her eyes for several long seconds, then opened them and shook her head. "The dark side is too prevalent on this planet for the Force to give clear guidance."
"Gut instinct."
Oriina matched Mathais' wry expression. "Gut instinct? I have a bad feeling about this."
Mathais groaned. "Why did I know you were going to say that?"
"I have had a revelation," Oriina said in response.
"I'm almost afraid to ask."
"A majority of my 'bad feelings' have centered around missions we go on together."
"Hey!" Mathais pouted. "What are you trying to tell me?"
"Stop being so skilled at the Battlemeld, and command will stop sending us to frontline engagements," Oriina chastised.
"You could always transfer to another anchor."
"I don't want to spend time training another," Oriina shook her head. "At least you know how to stay down and out of the way when people want to kill you."
"That's generally the reaction of most sane people in this galaxy," Mathais pointed out. "Insane people are the ones that stand up and engage the overwhelming odds in defense of a guy who's only job is to ensure that everyone in the meld is happy."
The speeder trip ended, and Mathais and Oriina disembarked. A clustering of over two-dozen Force-sensitives were waiting by a shuttle, Alema Solo in her full Knight of Ren outfit among them.
"Great, let's get this party started," Alema remarked. She motioned to the two other Knights of Ren with her. "This is Ror'jhan and Nyash Ren. My sister and brother in arms. Knights, the new ones are Mathais Tahal and my cousin Oriina."
The two pillars of muscle on either side of Alema tilted their heads in silent acknowledgment. The female of the duo tossed Oriina and Mathais sets of Yuuzhan Vong cloaking masquers which would enable them to not only blend in with their environment but also provided them with a small layer of protection against Force attacks.
"All aboard," Alema motioned to the shuttle. "Don't get too comfortable. It's going to be a short trip. We want to land at least a dozen klicks away from the palace or their seers will pick us up as a viable threat. If you're able to shift into Vongphase, do it now. If you have some alternative method for not existing in the Force, wait until we land."
Half of the group's Force-presence suddenly flickered out, Oriina's included. One of the Death Knights onboard retracted his armor's face-

plate to reveal a set of rainbow-colored eyes, Yuuzhan Vong biots.
"What type of opposition are we expecting before we hit the Council Chambers?"
"Well, Master Kel, think about every single nasty your Gloomy Knights have faced," Alema's smile was saccharine . "Then think about all the things that *might* be inside the Palace. Whatever you've come up with, it's worse than that. If we're lucky, they haven't released the zombies into the lower levels."
"Zombies?" One of the Jedi said incredulously.
"Yup. The head of the Dark Council archaeology division uncovered this nifty little gem called the Heart of Graush. After talking to the spirit that was inside the gem, Darth Revenant learned how to raise corpses and make them undead. If we encounter the zombies, don't get bitten or you'll fall under his control too."
"Anything else?" The Death Knight leader asked darkly.
Alema exaggerated a thinking pose. "Hmmm…A couple of very angry Sith ghosts roaming the place. They pack a punch. Then we have the Sith-alchemy-mixed-with-Yuuzhan-Vong-shaping super-soldiers, they really don't have any sense of humor."
"Don't forget the Hall of Agony," one of Alema's companions reminded.
"Right, that. But we like that place," Alema looked to the other two.
"It'll be their first time there," Ror'jhan reminded.
"I guess," Alema said with a hint of annoyance. "Yes, there's a Hall of Agony too."
"Not a happy place I take it?" another Death Knight said dryly.
"No, that's the Hall of Ecstasy," Alema said cheerfully. "Our cantina and night-club rolled into one. The Hall of Agony is our prison, interrogation, and morgue rolled into one. Pretty heavy Force presence there, and it'll knock you out cold and give you a year's worth of nightmares if you're not ready."
"You dark Jedi have such ridiculous names for your buildings and places," the lead Death Knight snorted.
"Says the Jedi who have the Hall of a Thousand Fountains, Hall of Dreams, and Hall of Fluffy Bunny-Rabbits and Nexu Kittens."
"Hall of Tranquility," supplied one of the other Order of Rhysode Guardians.
"Fluffy bunnies and Nexu kittens, same idea," Alema shot back.
The shuttle landed, and the rest of the group appeared to disappear from the Force entirely.
"Stay close, walk exactly where me and my buddies walk," Alema said in warning. "Do not hesitate to kill *anyone* in our way. All the slaves

and servants in the palace are fully loyal to the Dark Council and will sound the alarm if you let them."
"Understood."
"Initiating the Battlemeld now," Mathais voiced, closing his eyes for a moment and drawing together the Force-presences of the members of the strike-team. "Vongphased guys and girls, need you to upload directly."
A second later and foreign-feeling Force-energies intertwined itself with the rest of the meld. Mathais nodded once to show his receiving of their presences, and continued to weave a tight, interconnected web that would allow their entire group to act as one entity. The weakness of each individual member were counter-balanced by the strength of another. Everything one noticed, so did the rest of the group. At the same time, they were all individuals still, their minds simply sharing their knowledge and experiences with the rest.
"Meld stable," Mathais reported unnecessarily. He knew that the rest had felt that exact moment everyone's breathing and heart-rate beat in synchronous time.
"Let's move out," Alema confirmed.
They scrambled across the Korriban landscape, their own masquers cloaking them from any visual scan of the region. The afternoon sunlight was already beginning to cast long shadows on the ground. All around them, eroding statues of ancient Sith of legend stood a silent watch. The trek through ten kilometers of the harsh environment of Korriban was a hard one, the scorching heat radiating from the rocks even as the sun continued to set. Stealth was priority for the group, more than once they alternated their path to avoid enemy patrols and the various beasts that inhabited the planet.
Several hours into their journey, they could hear the opening salvo of the Free Alliances' last push into Dark Council controlled territory. The familiar sounds of heavy artillery fired from both sides shook the ground, deep rumbles echoing through the valleys like thunder claps as ordnance rained down. The howling drone of airship engines accompanied the percussion, the atmospheric fighters unleashing payloads of a variety of missiles into the defenders' ranks.
The infiltrators passed one last bend in the dry river-bed they had been following and the Dark Palace came into view, its looming presence gleaming in the evening sunlight.
"We wait for nightfall," Alema directed the group. "Meditate and recover your strength now. We won't have time to do so once we enter the palace."

"No matter how this ends," Oriina almost whispered, her gaze locked on the inky black walls of the distant palace. "This will be a night history will remember for a very long time."
"Let's hope we're on the winning side then," Alema remarked, her lopsided grin audible in her words. "Ultimately, I want to be the one doing the remembering, not the one being remembered."

NUR IV NUR

Mathais Tahal could not remember being so exhausted as the battered and bloodied group finally approached the chambers of the Dark Council. Their trip through the Palace of Darkness had been far from bloodless, with seven of their members falling in battle and two others missing an arm. Standing before the heavy doors, however, Mathais was reminded once more why they had endured so much, why they had sacrificed and bled. They were going to stop the individuals within from carrying out their insane plan, no matter the cost to themselves. And now they were mere meters away from doing what they had set out to do, atop a grand-staircase with a set of intricately engraved metal doors in their way. The torches on either side of the door flickered and danced, giving the engraved scenes about the history of the Sith an eerie sort of life. It was just the sort of intimidating and macabre decoration one would expect to find on the council-room door of a Sith palace.
"Mathais," Alema's voice broke through his tiredness.
"Alema?"
"We need you to stay out here and make sure our meld is durasteel strong. We're going to need everyone at their best in this fight and can't afford to have anything working against us."
"I'll…"
"Be coming with us, 'Riina," Alema interrupted her younger cousin, sticking an arm out when Oriina tried to step to Mathais' side. "Like I said, we're going to need all the fighters for this. The lords and ladies inside are not people we want to underestimate."
"There are still many of the Dark Council's minions in this building," Oriina protested.
"All the more reason to get this done as fast as possible," Death Knight Kel said grimly, his armor covered in blood-stains and viscera. "If their minions attack while we're fighting them, we're done for."
"I'll be okay," Mathais said reassuringly. "You really think I'm going to let you, Korsyan, and Zia down?"
Oriina pushed Alema's arm aside and stepped forward to hug Mathais tightly. She whispered harshly into his ear as she did."Don't you dare be a hero. If you have to run, run. Got it?"

"If I have to," Mathais promised.
Oriina exhaled and took a step back, her blue eyes looking him once over. "When I come back you better not have a scratch on you."
"I'll be fine," Mathais repeated.
"Not a scratch," Oriina wagged a finger in his face.
"Get going and save the galaxy," Mathais laughed.
Oriina breathed out one last time and nodded. "May the Force favor the brave."
"And the foolish, don't forget those too," Mathais added with a boyish grin.
"Definitely the foolish," Oriina hefted her weapons and nodded to the others. "Let's end this."
The surviving members of their infiltration group pushed open the towering doors to the council chambers and stepped inside. The doors swung shut behind them with a loud banging sound that reverberated down the stairwell and into the antechamber below. Mathais sat back on his heels in front of the door, closing his eyes and focusing fully on the vital meld
"Alema Ren, how predictable." An elderly gentleman stood, his face pale and eyes yellowed with the dark-side. Rising from stone thrones all around the room were a dozen other individuals, their visages equally twisted from the powers they harnessed.
"Glad I could oblige, your Extreme Darkness," Alema mock bowed. She then straightened and pointed her white-bladed saber at him. "Your plans end here."
"Foolish, just like your parents," the Emperor of the Dark Council said dismissively. The members of the Dark Council activated their lightsabers in unison, blades of red illuminating their equally twisted visages. "Your death will serve as a reminder to all those who turn their back on their emperor."
Alema nonchalantly held out a hand and twisted it sideways. One of the Dark Council members let out a gurgle as his neck was unexpectedly snapped. His body toppled down the steps that led to his throne and landed on the black flagstones that made up the council room floor. "You have to kill me first."
"Kill them all!" The emperor roared.
Mathais kept his breathing calm and measured, coordinating the actions of the others so that every gap was accounted for. He infused the meld with confidence, with righteous anger, manipulating the emotions of those in the meld to ensure that they were at their best. He could see in their minds' eye as the Dark Council leaped into action from all directions, lightsabers and Force attacks unleashed in a

barrage of deadliness that would have overwhelmed a lesser group. The Emperor, on the other hand, seemed content to sit back in his own throne and watch the fight unfold.
The battle was fierce and relentless. Two of the strike-team fell within the first minute of combat, three of the council as well. Mathais continued to inject his strength into the meld to empower the others, willing them to fight on despite the oppressive auras the council members were emitting.
And then Mathais felt a new threat. He opened his eyes and saw Dark Council troopers and acolytes slowly fill the antechamber, weapons at the ready. He checked the meld and knew that those inside the room behind him needed a lot more time.
"Hey guys, sorry, private party," Mathais greeted the amassing horde of Dark Council soldiers. He held his hands out to his side. "Invite only."
The snap hiss of dozens of red blades answered him. The charging sound of dozens of blaster-rifles accompanied the sabers a second later.
A dark Jedi in the gold-lined black robes of the Palace Guard stepped forward, saber-staff in hand. "Stand aside, Jedi and we will grant you a quick death."
"Do you have an invitation?" Mathais asked, keeping his voice light despite the hammering of his heart in his chest.
The dark Jedi leaped upwards and landed on a step lower than Mathais, his blade stopping just under the Jedi's chin. "How's this for an invitation, Jedi? Stand aside, I will not tell you to do so again."
Mathais looked into the slotted mask of the dark Jedi and shook his head slowly. "No invitation, no entry. Simple as that."
The dark Jedi stepped forward to thrust his lightsaber into Mathais' head. The Jedi, however, whirled around the attack, a lightshoto dropping into each of his hands. The dark Jedi tried to slash at Mathais once more, but again hit nothing but air as his target spun around the length of the blade. Two beams of yellow lit up the darkened corridors of the palace and flashed through the air in a miniature whirlwind.
When the motion was completed, the palace guard let out a gurgling sound before falling into four pieces, each piece tumbling back down the staircase and into the crowd of Dark Council soldiers below.
Mathais looked back to the others as if needing to explain his actions. "He didn't have an invitation."
The ones in front looked at the dismembered body then back up at Mathais, their fury spiking in the Force. For his part, Mathais let out a rough breath and twirled his lightshotos in his hands. He needed to give his allies inside the council chamber more time, as much time as

possible. There was no backing down, and despite his promise to Oriina, no running either.
The blaster-rifle wielding guards opened fire in a torrent of red lasers, the shrieks of their blasters ringing out in the chamber. Mathais' twin shotos weaved an intricate pattern in the air as he deflected each and every bolt sent his way, a majority reflected right back to their points of origin. After the first barrage was over, several dozen guards lay dead on the ground.
Unfortunately for Mathais, one lucky shot had fried his left lightshoto, leaving him one weapon down. He sighed mournfully at his ruined weapon and threw it aside, assuming a double-handed grip with his remaining lightshoto.
The dark Jedi acolytes surged forward next, each of them sprinting up the stairwell with red blades extended. Mathais sent a wave of Force energy rippling down the steps, sending more than a few acolytes flying off the stairs. Some made it up, though, and he quickly used his remaining yellow blade to deflect the hate-filled slashes and stabs sent his way. He head-butted one attacker, threw a second into a third, deflected a fourth. The only thing keeping him from being overwhelmed was the width of the stairs—just enough to accommodate five people side by side—and its fifty-step count.
A red blade sliced through the air, severing the top of his remaining lightshoto and singeing the top of his hand. Mathais reflexively recoiled and thrust his other hand out. The torrent of Force energy sent his immediate group of enemies sprawling at the bottom of the stairs, some with cracked skulls or other important bones.
Silence fell for a moment as the surviving dark acolytes regrouped. Mathais took that moment to catch his breath, closing his eyes briefly to regain some of the strength he had expended. But when he opened his eyes, he watched in dismay as more palace guards rushed the antechamber, as well as squads of force-pike and vibrolance-wielding footmen.
Mathais regarded the group wearily. Just repelling their initial push had taken a lot out of him, and he didn't think he could maintain the meld *and* counter this group at the same time. A hand reflexively went to the small of his back and rested atop a small compartment, though it seemed to Mathais that any resistance now would be wholly pointless.
The palace guardsmen began ascending the stairs, one step at a time. The Jedi's eyes darted left and right as he took in the approaching dark Jedi, and after releasing a deep breath, he realized that he was no longer afraid of what might happen. He smiled, laughed at that realization. So what if he died on these steps? He'd at least have given

the others enough time to save the galaxy. Compared to the consequences of not standing his ground, the horde before him seemed inconsequential.
He continued to laugh, causing the palace guardsmen to stop in bewilderment.
"What's so funny, Jedi?" One sneered.
Mathais continued to laugh as he opened the compartment his right hand was resting on. "I just realized what my Doubly Great Gramps felt when he stared down that line of Yuuzhan Vong."
"What?"
"It doesn't matter what happens to me today," Mathais continued, a very old lightsaber sliding out of the casing and into his hands. "The only thing that matters is that you guys aren't getting into the council chambers."
"There is only one of you, Jedi. You cannot possibly hope to stop us," the palace guardsman snorted in disbelief.
Mathais closed his eyes, silently sending a prayer to the Force. He rarely took the time to even commune with the Force as if it were a living creature or divine being, but he figured that now was a good a time as any seeing that he was about to join it. When his eyes opened again, they were shimmering with energy, and Mathais brought his hands out in front of him, holding a single lightsaber. A golden blade hummed to life, pushing back the gloom of the palace and creating a cone of light before the Jedi.
Mathais inhaled and relaxed at the warmth that infused him, as if his ancestor was standing alongside him that very moment. As long as he had the Force, he would never be alone. When he glanced down the stairs at the palace guardsmen, he was momentarily surprised to see them take several steps back. It was then he noticed the ghostly white figures flanking him on either side. His jaw dropped as he recognized a few of them, including Oriina's great uncle who had sacrificed himself to free millions of slaves from pirates. The figure to his immediate right, however, he would have known anywhere.
"Doubly Great Gramps?" Mathais rasped.
Ganner Rhysode winked at Mathais. "I would say 'in the flesh' but somehow I don't think that'll work in my situation."
"What…how…?"
"Every holder of that saber gave it their all when their time had come," the Falleen ghost of Natua Wan said patiently. "And when each holder died, a part of them was imbued in the saber. Blame Ganner for starting it. His ego was so great even death couldn't hold all of him."
"Always know how to brighten my spirit, Green Girl."

"Please stop with the jokes," an Omwati Jedi groaned.
"In any case, we're here mostly for moral support," Oriina's Great Uncle said lightly. "Technically we can't do anything but make fun of those guys. The whole 'evil lightning from beyond the grave' is more a Sith spirit specialty than a Jedi one."
"Think of the saber as a holocron of sorts, holding an image of who we once were," an Arkanian ghost smirked. "Probably helps that I made a few modifications to the saber so that it could better hold the personality resonance of multiple people."
"We fight as one den," a Selonian Jedi Master said, focusing on staring down the palace guard. "For our friends and family."
"And the Force will be with you, always," a teenage Twi'lek ghost grinned toothily, her robes that of a Padawan. "Always wanted to say that. Yes!"
"You had your chance when you popped up for my grand finale," Oriina's uncle pointed out.
"It was my first time!" the Twi'lek said in exasperation. "I didn't mean to say, 'oh, cool, I can do this?' when I first appeared."
Mathais licked his dry lips at the eight ghosts that surrounded him. "Guys here to give me one final send off, then?"
"Whether you live is entirely up to you," Ganner shrugged. "Trust in yourself, in the reason you're taking a stand here today. If you fall, just know that you will do so in great company."
Mathais laughed at that and nodded, refocusing on the bewildered dark Jedi below. "Got it."
"You know what to do next then," Ganner said with a mischievous grin. "You've seen the movie often enough."
Mathais grinned back. "Yup, thanks for the support all."
"*Any time*," Ganner's words were a soft whisper-like breeze.
It was then Mathais slowly opened his eyes. He frowned as he hadn't remembered closing them prior, and then did a double-take as the ante-chamber below began filling with the same reinforcements he could have sworn he had just seen earlier. *A vision,* he thought silently with a nostalgic smile. Time to get to work. He still had a hand on Ganner's saber at the small of his back, and he very carefully brought the weapon forward.
Below, the palace guard began to ascend the stairs, just as before. Watching the black-robed figures approach in the same manner as was in his vision, Mathais couldn't help but laugh for an entirely different reason. His eyes were alight and the burden of holding his position didn't feel so much like a burden any more.
"What's so funny, Jedi?"

His Doubly Great Gramp's lightsaber hummed to life in his hands, and Mathais stared down at those who dare approach. With a defiant grin, he aimed the shimmering blade downwards and slowly lowered it until the tip was scorching the black rock of the very top step. Not looking away from the lead palace guardsman, Mathais began to draw a line from wall to wall. Job complete, he held the saber upwards and addressed the horde of black-robed people below him. "Come on! One at a time or all at once, I don't give a damn. You guys aren't passing this line."

The dark Jedi in front smirked. "We shall see."

Those with him held up their lightsabers, vibrolances, and force-pikes, and with challenging yells, they charged.

NUR V NUR

The doors to the council chamber opened with a creaking groan. Utter silence followed as smoke and dust wafted outwards. There was no other motion on either side of the door, an outside observer finding only corpses upon corpses everywhere one looked. There was a literal mountain of them at the foot of the grand staircase leading to the council chamber. Even more sprawled out along the steps going upwards. At the top of the stairs, a single figure lay prone on the black stone, the lone presence behind a line burned into the ground. His body was covered in multiple saber wounds, the Force having burned away his shirt in the fierce fighting and leaving every slice and stab visible.

Inside the council chamber seemed worse, if that was possible. Bodies and parts of bodies were mixed in with the fallen pillars that had lined the chamber. The roof itself was caved in, large rocky slabs lay shattered on more bodies. Every single throne had been demolished, as if they had been turned into projectiles and bashed repeatedly against every surface in the room. Burn marks from flame and lightning, frost rapidly melting, ruined mantel pieces and overturned lamps. Nothing in the room had been left untouched.

The normally stoic Ryva Durron could only close her eyes and cry silent tears at the sight. Kol Skywalker placed a hand on her shoulder in solemn empathy as the advanced teams announced that the room was 'clear'.

"I sent them all to their deaths, Kol," Ryva said hoarsely. "I…I can't do this anymore. Sending kids to die for us."

"We have a live one here!" A voice rang out through the doors of the shattered council chamber. "Get some healers over here, stat!"

Both Kol and Ryva hurried in the direction of the voice and found a Guardian levitating a large metal beam off of a blood-covered Alema Solo.
"Alema," Kol rasped, quickly moving to the blonde's side. Or rather, what was left of her. Both her arms had been severed by precision lightsaber strikes, and she bore a wicked lightsaber wound across her front that would have sliced her from shoulder to opposite hip if the cut had been just a little deeper. How she survived was evident in the shell of rage and hatred she had wrapped herself in, the powerful emotions keeping her dying body together by sheer willpower alone.
"Another one, here!" a Sentinel from the Army of Light yelled.
Ryva stood to let Kol stabilize the crazily reckless member of his large family to move towards the new survivor. A hand flew up to her mouth when she saw Oriina Ekala's limp figure carried out of a pile of debris. Her dust covered figure was completely intact, though it was clear that her legs were badly broken. "Set her down, here."
"Yes, ma'am."
Ryva brushed Oriina's face, moving the blood-soaked strands of hair clear. With extreme care, the Jedi Master used the Force to bring Oriina back to consciousness. "Guardian Ekala, can you hear me?"
Oriina stirred, then took in a great gasping breath of air and frantically tried to push Ryva's hands away. "No! I have to get to him, let me go!"
"Guardian Ekala, it's okay, it's over," Ryva managed, barely keeping the struggling Jedi from causing more damage to herself.
"Mathais," Oriina said in a single word, blue eyes pleading with Ryva.
"Guard…Oriina," Ryva breathed out, a pained expression breaking through her control. "He didn't make…"
"He's in *morichro*, let me go!" Oriina wheezed, trying to claw her way out of Ryva's arms once more. "The Force didn't keep him alive this long for me to fail him now, it can't have. I'm his guardian, I have to protect…"
"Easy, easy," Ryva tried to soothe the frantic Jedi, all the while trying to keep herself from hoping once more. "I'll take you to him."
Oriina stopped struggling, but twisted her broken body towards the doors of the chamber. "He has to still be alive. He has to."
"You're certain he's in *morichro*?" Ryva asked with uncharacteristic tenderness, not wanting to get her hopes up.
"Positive," Oriina got out, coughing up blood as she did. She closed her eyes, pained as her breathing became more labored. "It's part of the plan we came up with when we were first partnered. If he was ever separated from me, injured, and surrounded by hostiles, he was to drop into *morichro* so that they would think he was dead and pass by."

"Smart," Ryva blinked in surprise.
Exiting the chamber, they saw that Mathais' body had been placed on a stretcher, a tattered Jedi robe draped over his still form. Oriina let out a small whimper and wiggled herself free of Ryva's support, crawling the rest of the way to his stretcher. She weakly pulled off the shroud and rested her head onto his chest, eyes closing in concentration. The seconds turned into minutes, but the debris and blood-covered blonde didn't move.
Ryva felt her throat tighten and she stepped forward. "Oriina…."
"I knew it," Oriina practically sobbed, she crawled her way up his body and rested herself against him. "Get him in a bacta tank. The way his body is now, if I free him from *morichro* he'll die in seconds."
"How long does he have as it is?" Ryva asked, deferring to Mathais' closest friend.
"Minutes," Oriina muttered, coughing again.
Ryva felt the younger woman's Force-presence dim, and gestured for several nearby healers to assist. "Make sure these two make it out this, that's an order."
"Yes, Master Durron."
She saw Kol emerge with Alema on a hover-stretcher. "She'll make it?"
"If the Force wills it," Kol answered solemnly.
"Any others?"
"Two more were pulled from the wreck alive," Kol said. "One of Alema's people, one of ours."
"And the Emperor?" Ryva asked seriously. Everyone on the battlefield had felt the Dark Council die one by one, the last death routing the remaining resistance and allowing the Free Alliances to push into the palace. The Emperor's own presence, however, was proving nebulous. As if he was dead, and he wasn't. It didn't bode well at all.
"We have found his body," Kol answered. "It is dead."
"But?"
"You feel it too, don't you? He is gone, but not gone," Kol said, not trying to be vague on purpose. It was difficult to describe the Emperor's sudden disappearance in the Force. It wasn't a 'dead' like the rest of the council. But he was very clearly no longer present in the galaxy.
"Maybe the strike-team survivors can fill in the picture when they recover," Ryva exhaled. "In the meantime, are the Order of the Lost and Order of the Ren in any condition to take over the scattered dark siders?"

"A new Council of Lords is already being formed, the moderates are coming out ahead," Kol confirmed. "With luck, this should help keep the peace for another century at least."
"We can only hope," Ryva gazed about at the destruction surrounding them. Despite being an impressive scene of carnage, the toll outside was many, many times worse. To maintain the attention of the Dark Council forces, the Free Alliances had to push themselves through a meat-grinder, with all allied governments suffering very heavy casualties. "The price for it was high indeed."

NUR V NUR

Mathais Tahal did his best not to look sheepish as he described how he held off wave after wave of Dark Council reinforcements while the others fought inside. Oriina, seated next to him, was beaming with pride, though she had bopped him on the head when he had told the rest about drawing a line in the ground. His secret was out. His agreed-upon *morichro* passwords had been 'I know your name is Rhysode.' Given that Master Durron, Skywalker, and several other important masters had been present, they quickly understood the significance of that password; especially in the light of his heroic stand in front of the council doors.
"So…yeah…then I ran out of bad guys, ran out of adrenaline, and had just enough strength to put myself in *morichro* before my internal organs all simultaneously failed," Mathais summed up sheepishly.
"And you say this saber contained the imprints off its previous holders?" The head of the Order of the E'ron, Jedi Master Fous asked with great interest.
"Yeah, I think, unless I imagined it all in my delirium at facing off an army of bad guys," Mathais floated Ganner's saber over to the man.
"Interesting, I am not sensing any resonance or any matrix-crystal capable of holding a Force charge," Master Fous shrugged. He smiled and floated the saber back to Mathais. "The Force often acts in mysterious ways. Just as it gifted you with this saber before the battle. Perhaps, only those meant to see what you have seen are granted permission by the Force."
"It is good you survived, nonetheless," Master Durron smiled warmly. "Now I believe this brings us to a more serious matter."
"Big-Dark-and-Greedy," Alema voiced. Her still-growing-replacement-limbs encased in a special Yuuzhan Vong wrap that acted as an incubator for the cloned tissues.
"Emperor Snoke," Grandmaster Skywalker confirmed.

"We saw his body, but did not feel his death," another Jedi Master voiced. "Is it possible he is still on Korriban or another Sith stronghold, biding his time?"
Alema exchanged glances with the others, who returned her significant look with one of their own. "It's not the *where* you should be worried out, Masters. It's the *when*."
"The 'when'?" More than a few voiced their confusion.
"When the strike-team was battling the Dark Council, he sat back and started this weird ritual. I saw what he was doing and managed to fry his face with Force-Lightning just a second before the ritual was completed. You thought he was ugly with hair? You should have seen him without it. He looked like some sort of Muun, no offense Master Tonard."
"None taken," the Muun Jedi Master at the table said graciously.
"The 'when'?" Prompted Kol, knowing some of his colleagues were not used to Alema's irreverent attitudes towards Jedi authority.
"He was in Flow-Walk," Alema finished. "The more advanced, Sithy type, not the Jedi scrying type."
Her announcement caused many in the room to rise to their feet. Cries of "Impossible." And "I don't believe it," sounded.
"Believe it or don't, I know what Flow-Walking looks like. I'm not sure if my blast of lightning kept him from reaching his target, but he finished the ritual before we could stop him."
"Then that means…" Ryva led.
"His spirit is somewhere in the flow of time. I don't know whether he was going to the future or the past," Alema finished grimly. "The only thing I know is that as far as we're concerned, he's dead in our timeline."
"It is out of our hands then," Grandmaster Skywalker grimaced. "Sith Flow-walking has never been proven to have any tangible results, and if this was Snoke's desperation attempt to escape, then it is quite possible he has doomed himself to the will of the Force."
"Great job, all of you," Ryva said. "We'll be sure you and those who fell alongside you are properly rewarded for your actions that night on Korriban. For now get some rest. We'll handle things from here."
The other masters in the room all made sounds of agreement as the meeting broke up.
"Master Skywalker," Alema called out before the Grandmaster left the room.
"Jedi Solo?"
"A word?" Alema asked, remaining seated with the other strike-team members. "Master Durron, Master Djo, please stay as well."

At her politeness, the three Jedi Masters quickly retook their seats.
"There is something else?" Kol asked once the other Jedi left the room.
"I have a very strong feeling that his Flow-Walking was successful," Alema said solemnly.
"Is there a reason why you would suspect his attempt would be different from the countless others who have tried to change time and failed?" Anala Djo asked.
"Before the Force took his spirit, he looked at me and smiled," Alema began. "He told me 'You think you've won, but Mother is not done yet. Her children will rise once more. The Family of Solo will rue this day. I will ensure it.'"
"Mother…." Silence followed as the three Jedi Masters froze in horror, their minds reaching the same conclusion. The name had a connotation that had everything to do with the dark side.
"Abeloth," Ryva breathed out as if the name was a curse. "It would explain why the Dark Council was so powerful and could hide their actions for so long."
"She's back then," Anala said stone-faced.
"We knew it would only be a matter of time," Kol Skywalker concluded gravely.
"At least we have the Dagger of Mortis this time around thanks to your son," Ryva inclined her head to Kol. "And we can finally end her for good."
Oriina and Mathais both stood, their expression resolute. Mathais spun Ganner's lightsaber on the tip of one finger and smiled at the others.
"And the Order of Rhysode will do our part in putting her down. After all, insanity is our specialty."
NUR Story End NUR